



The Voice of
Adult Learning

LIFELONG LEARNING PARTICIPATION IN IRELAND

A focus on marginalised
and vulnerable groups

Developed by:

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SOLAS
learning works

L&W LEARNING AND
WORK INSTITUTE

AONTAS Research Report

Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland – a focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups

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Executive Summary

It is widely acknowledged that lifelong learning participation fuels a host of positive benefits, both at individual and societal-level. Acknowledging these benefits, the New European Agenda for Adult Learning outlines a commitment to ensuring that lifelong learning participation is an opportunity provided equally to all (The Council of the European Union, 2021). This is reflected in the development of the EU Education and Training 2020 Strategy, which describes a lifelong learning participation rate of 15% as a key objective (European Commission, 2021).

Despite this goal, findings from SOLAS show adults with lower educational attainment, the unemployed, those working in occupations commonly referred to as 'low-skilled', and those of an older age are less likely to participate in lifelong learning (SOLAS, 2021). Similarly, previous research by AONTAS has identified marginalised and vulnerable groups, including lone parents and people living in Direct Provision, as experiencing greater challenges in accessing formal and non-formal education in Ireland (AONTAS, 2022).

This report outlines the findings from AONTAS' Lifelong Learning Participation Research, including a total of 1,101 participants. This report presents the findings from the Learning and Work Institute Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey, commissioned by AONTAS, and shows 65% of adults aged 17-64 years in Ireland have participated in learning in the last 3 years. In this population, several factors were found to positively influence lifelong learning participation, including being employed, living in Dublin, higher educational attainment, higher age when exiting formal education, higher occupation class and younger age. The findings from this national survey support a growing body of evidence reaffirming a Matthew Effect in education,

implying that individuals who experience greater participation and progression in formal education at earlier phases of life continue to observe greater educational participation in adulthood (Bağcı, 2019). Acknowledging the limitations of online surveys in engaging marginalised and vulnerable groups in research, we recruited an additional 59 participants, through community organisations, to participate in focus group discussions.

This report, commissioned by SOLAS and arising from the 2021 SOLAS report, "Lifelong Learning Among Adults," includes findings from eight focus groups comprised of 6 cohorts of learners: lone parents, learners with intellectual disabilities and physical health issues, learners affected by addiction, learners affected by imprisonment, older adult learners (65+ years), and migrant learners. The focus groups, conducted between August-December 2022, highlight recurrent barriers to lifelong learning participation among marginalised groups in Ireland. This report describes the multi-layered and interrelated barriers experienced by marginalised and vulnerable groups in accessing lifelong learning opportunities and outlines considerations for policy and practice.

Key Findings:

Findings from the Learning and Work Institute:
Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey

- Findings from a national survey of 1,042 adults aged 17-64 years in Ireland, **show 65% have participated in learning** within the last three years
- In this survey, several factors were found to positively influence lifelong learning participation, including being employed, living in Dublin, higher educational attainment, higher age when exiting formal education, higher occupation class and younger age
- **University graduates were significantly more likely to have participated in lifelong learning** when compared to the sample average, reaffirming the **Matthew Effect** in education

Findings from focus groups with marginalised and vulnerable learners:

- **Tailored wrap-around support services:** Marginalised and vulnerable adults face multi-layered and interrelated barriers in accessing education. These include a lack of support with childcare, over-subscribed courses or programmes, a need for peer-led courses, absence of trauma-informed care training among practitioners and a lack of therapeutic counselling services. The findings highlight a need to embed tailored support services that seek to address the co-existing barriers experienced by marginalised and vulnerable groups in lifelong learning participation
- **Financial barriers:** Most focus group participants reported financial barriers and the absence of childcare facilities as challenges to lifelong learning participation. Learners highlighted the impact of participating in adult education on existing income streams, including social welfare payments and housing supports, as impeding lifelong learning participation

- **Stigma and discrimination:** Focus group participants from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with stigmatised experiences, such as those affected by imprisonment and addiction, in addition to older adult learners, reported discriminatory practices and stigma as impeding motivation to lifelong learning participation
- **Learner voice:** Marginalised participants in the focus groups highlighted the need to promote a learning culture that is participative and needs-based and to actively capture and empower learner voice. Marginalised learners identified a lack of choice in module options and course scheduling, limited accredited or certified courses and opportunities for course progression, and the Garda vetting process as recurrent barriers to education. Additionally, learners reported little flexibility in the mode of course delivery and reduced access to learning throughout the Covid-19 pandemic
- **Digital skills support:** One-to-one, practical I.T. skills training was perceived as crucial for marginalised and vulnerable groups. Without digital support, marginalised participants reported disengagement with education, specifically where course delivery assumed technology readiness among all learners
- **Confidence:** Marginalised cohorts reported previous negative experiences in formal education, which impeded lifelong learning participation. Individuals affected by addiction and imprisonment spoke of the positive roles peer support and trauma-informed service provision played in enhancing confidence and learning engagement



Figure 1: Considerations for policy and practice to promote lifelong learning participation among marginalised and vulnerable groups in Ireland.

Introduction

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning

Organisation, is a membership organisation representing learners, practitioners, providers and other key stakeholders in adult education. AONTAS is committed to advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to access equal and equitable adult learning opportunities throughout their lives, and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning. Through research and advocacy, AONTAS aims to build a more inclusive, learner-centred lifelong learning system that enables adults to have a transformative learning experience.

Research conducted by AONTAS contributes to the development of evidence-based policies aiming to alleviate barriers and support meaningful participation for all in education. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum, commissioned by SOLAS and delivered by AONTAS, represents the largest Learner Voice project in Europe (AONTAS, 2022). In 2022, this project documented the experience of 3,164 FET Learners in Ireland through national and regional focus groups and a large-scale survey (AONTAS, 2022). This annual project captures the challenges experienced by FET learners, identifying areas for improvement and examples of best practice in FET provision. Commonly cited barriers to participation in FET include geographic inequities in the provision of support services, such as literacy, childcare, financial and digital supports (AONTAS, 2022). Previous negative experience in formal education and stigma further contribute to difficulties in adult education participation (AONTAS, 2022). Less is known, however, about the barriers and challenges experienced by marginalised and vulnerable groups not currently enrolled in adult education, to lifelong learning participation.

Lifelong learning encompasses all learning activity, including formal, non-formal and informal learning undertaken throughout the life course (Learning and Work Institute, 2021). The concept of lifelong learning is based on UNESCO's four pillars of education: learning to be, learning to do, learning to know and learning to live together (UNESCO, 2004). There is a myriad of ways in which lifelong learning contributes to the personal and collective development of individuals and society. As explained by a recent National FET Learner Forum participant, *"[lifelong learning] gives you a sense of confidence and belief in yourself really. I think everyone has skills out there they don't realise they [have]."* While its value is clear, analyses conducted by SOLAS in 2021 reported a lifelong learning participation rate of 13% in Ireland, below the EU 2020 lifelong learning target of 15% (SOLAS, 2021). The findings identified people with lower educational attainment or older age as less likely to participate in lifelong learning. This builds on previous findings from the OECD, identifying lone parents and individuals without formal educational qualifications as underrepresented in formal and non-formal adult education (OECD, 2017). Similarly, UNESCO highlight the importance of lifelong learning for other marginalised and vulnerable groups, including migrants and refugees, in supporting quality of life and fostering a sense of belonging (UNESCO, 2021). Creating equal opportunities for lifelong learning participation has the potential to sustain social cohesion, promote social integration and support a more equal and equitable society. Therefore, this report aims to explore the barriers to lifelong learning participation experienced by marginalised or vulnerable groups in Ireland, with implications for policy and practice.

Project Methodology

The Learning and Work Institute: Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey

The Learning and Work Institute's (LWI) Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey, commissioned by AONTAS, was conducted in 2022. This survey represents a replicate of the annual LWI survey of adult learning participation in the United Kingdom (UK). To determine adult participation in learning in Ireland, fieldwork was conducted by an independent market research agency via their Internet Omnibus Survey. This survey included a total of 1,042 respondents, aged between 17 and 64 years. The sample has been weighted by age, gender and region to represent the adult population in Ireland aged 17-64, giving us an effective sample of 1,041. The survey responses were analysed and presented according to the following categories: participation in learning, reasons for participating in learning, method of learning, benefits of learning, challenges and barriers to learning, likelihood to learn in future, learning throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and demographic profile of respondents.

Focus groups with marginalised and vulnerable learners

Acknowledging the limitations associated with online surveys in capturing underserved and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in research, focus groups were conducted with marginalised and vulnerable groups in Ireland. Almost 50 organisations and centres providing Community Education, unaccredited and accredited courses, or who support marginalised or vulnerable groups were contacted during the study recruitment process. The final sample consisted of 59 people, all from groups previously identified as marginalised or vulnerable. The age range of the sample was between 18 and 79, with an average age of 40. Prior to study commencement, eight consultation sessions with community service providers and experts working in the sector were conducted, to define the research objective and examine ethical considerations. AONTAS consults with an academic expert group which helps to maintain

a solid academic foundation for the National FET Learner Forum research project. The academic expert group was consulted on various qualitative aspects of the Lifelong Learning Participation research including the focus group questions and ethical considerations. In total, eight focus groups were conducted with six marginalised or vulnerable groups, namely, lone parents, people with physical or intellectual disabilities, older adults, migrants, women affected by addiction and people affected by imprisonment (**Figure 2**). Gatekeepers within community organisations assisted the recruitment process for all groups, except for migrant learners, who were recruited directly through AONTAS. All focus groups were conducted between August-December 2022, recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim.

Qualitative data analysis: Identification of barriers to lifelong learning participation

To explore focus group themes pertinent to barriers to lifelong learning participation, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied, given its suitability for detailed examinations of lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is useful for analysing topics which are emotionally complex, such as experiences of trauma and pain. It allows the researcher to document experiences, including psycho-somatic phenomena, which may be difficult to articulate (Smith et al., 2009). Throughout the focus groups, participants provided explicit recommendations pertinent to the barriers they have experienced in lifelong learning participation. Recommendations encompass both descriptive and conceptual comments from participants, relevant to considerations for policy and practice in lifelong learning service provision. Conceptual comments include the ideologies, concepts and assumptions which inductively underlie the data – it looks at what is hidden in the data (Larkin et al., 2006). In IPA, there are two forms of theme development procedures; emergent themes and subordinate themes. Emergent themes occur as the researcher initially analyses the data line by line. Subordinate themes occur across the data sets and present a cohesive framework following the development of codes or patterns of meaning

(Larkin et al., 2006). Comparisons will be made between the theories and themes highlighted within the literature and the primary data findings presented in this report. Key themes, including

both descriptive and conceptual barriers to lifelong learning participation, are identified, with implications for policy and practice.

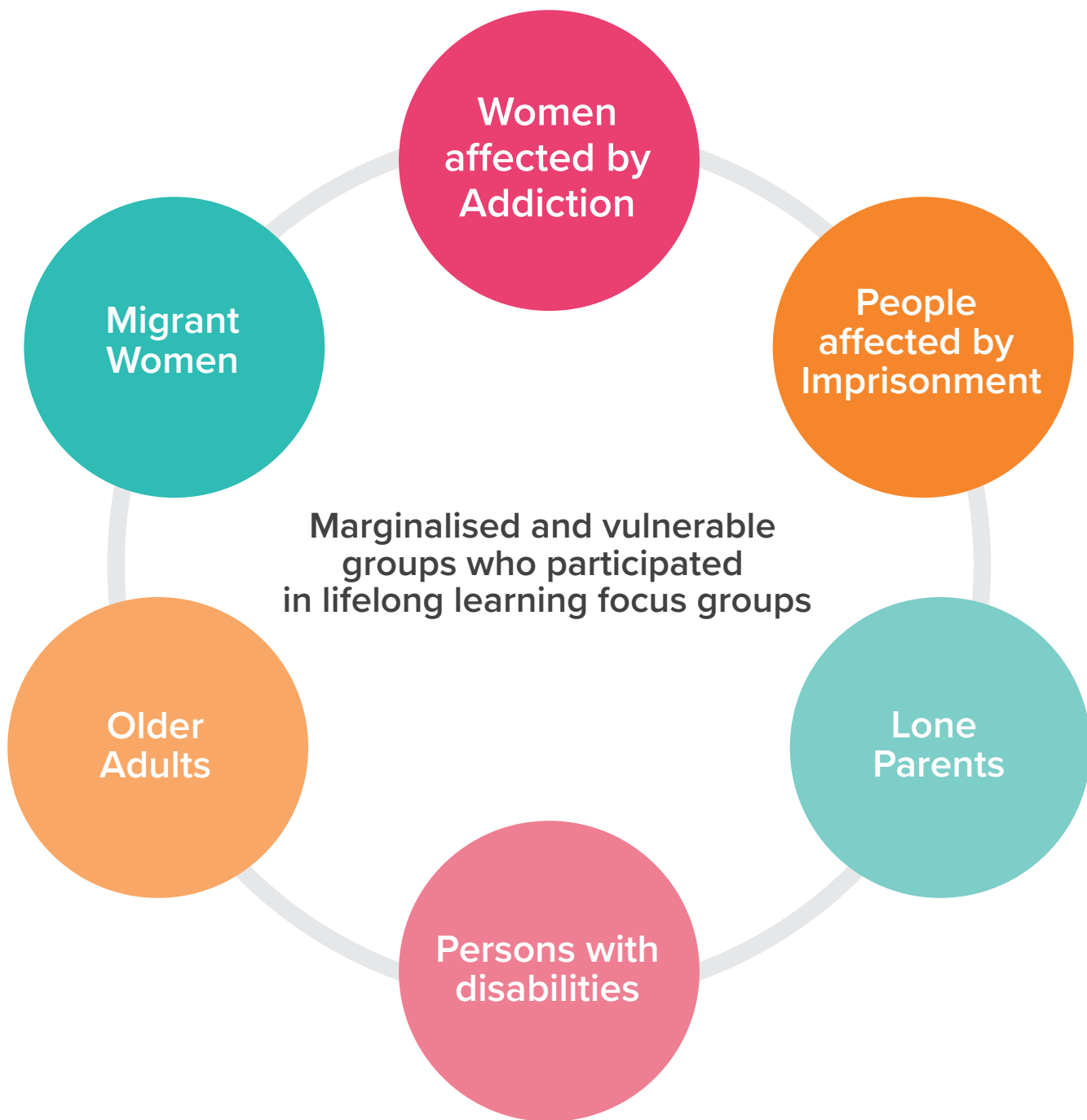


Figure 2: Marginalised and vulnerable groups who participated in lifelong learning focus groups

Learning and Work Institute Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey Results

Survey respondent characteristics

Overall, 1,042 participants completed the survey (weighted 1,041), with population demographic and socioeconomic characteristics described in *Supplementary Table 1*. In summary, a majority of respondents were aged between 35-64 years (62%), lived in Leinster (55%), including 28% residing in Dublin, most were employed (75%) and over half had completed a third-level educational qualification (51%). Importantly, 46% of participants reported exiting full-time formal education aged 21 years or older. A minority of participants identified as parents (34%) or reported unpaid caring responsibilities (21%).

Participation in learning

To determine the proportion of respondents engaged in learning, the following definition was provided:

“Learning can mean practicing, studying, or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training. You can do it regularly (each day or month) or you can do it for a short period of time. It can be full-time or part-time, done at home, at work, or in another place like college. Learning does not have to lead to a qualification. We are interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished.”

Based on this definition, respondents were asked when they last participated in learning:

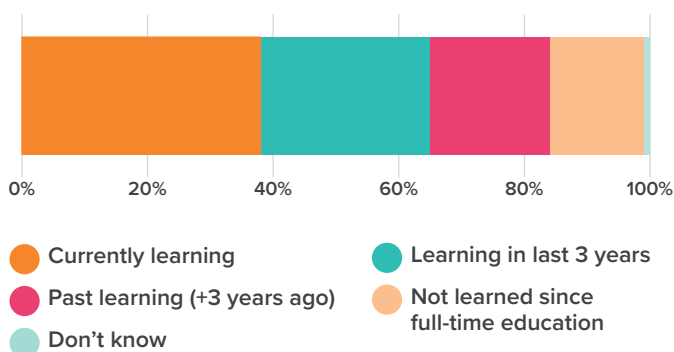


Figure 3: Overall participation in learning

The findings show:

- Almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) have participated in learning within the last three years
- 38% of respondents said that they are currently participating in learning
- Just over a quarter (27%) said that they have completed some learning activity in the last three years
- Around one in five respondents (19%) said that they have studied or learned, but this was over three years ago
- 15% of respondents said that they have not studied or learned since leaving full-time education

Learning participation based on demographic factors

When respondents' learning status was examined based on demographic, socioeconomic and geographic factors, key differences were observed:

- **Employment status:** Employed respondents are more likely to take part in learning than unemployed respondents (68% vs 45%, respectively).
- **Occupation class:** Managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals are more likely than clerical, service or sale workers to have participated in learning recently (74% vs 67%, respectively).
- **Age:** Participants aged between 17-24 years old are most likely to participate in learning, with a participation rate of 88%. As age increases, the participation rate decreases to 73% of 25-34-year-olds, 63% of adults aged 35-44, 54% of 45-54-year-olds and 48% of respondents aged 55 years or older.
- **Education:** Adults who exited formal education aged 21 or older were significantly more likely to have participated in learning recently when compared to the sample average (70%). This compares to 59% of those who left full-time education aged 19-20, 55% who left aged 17-18 years, and just half (50%) who left aged 16 or below. Corresponding with these findings, university graduates are significantly more likely to have participated in learning recently when compared to the sample average (72%).
- **Region:** Respondents based in Dublin are significantly more likely to be current or recent learners (71%). This compares to 63% of respondents from Munster, 63% from the rest of Leinster, and 62% from Connacht/Ulster. Of note, whether respondents reside in urban or rural areas however, does not have a significant impact on participation rates.

Reasons for participating in learning

Most respondents (65%) who participated in learning within the last three years reported reasons relating to their career or work as motivating factors. When asked how they thought this learning would help their work or career, respondents said that their learning would help them to progress in their current employment – either to develop or improve in their current job role (44%), or to achieve a promotion in their current line of work (15%). Nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents participated in learning to retrain for a different job or career, while 10% did so to get a similar role in their current line of work.

When asked about their broader reasons for learning participation, respondents cited a range of personal and professional motivations. These included being interested in the subject (38%), to develop as a person (37%), and to do their current job better/improve their job skills (32%). Other common motivations include receiving a recognised qualification (24%), improving self-confidence (19%), or for better pay (18%).

Barriers to Learning

Participants who reported no participation in learning in the last three years were asked about the main barriers preventing them from doing so. Overall, limited time was the most commonly identified barrier (29%), with a significant proportion reporting financial barriers (25%), negative perceptions of capabilities due to age (25%) and a lack of confidence (15%) as impeding their ability to participate in learning.

Table 1: Barriers to learning

Barrier	Percentage
Work/other time pressures	29%
Cost/money/can't afford it	25%
I feel I am too old	25%
I don't feel confident enough	15%
I am put off by tests and exams	13%
I haven't got round to doing it	11%
Childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities	10%
I don't know what is available or how to find out what is	9%
Transport/too far to travel	8%
An illness or disability	5%
Lack of digital skills/confidence for online learning	4%
My home environment is not suitable for online learning	4%
Lack of broadband for online learning	3%
Negative experience of learning in the past	3%
I have difficulties with reading, writing or numbers	2%
Lack of digital equipment for online learning	2%
I am ineligible to take part due to the social welfare payment I receive e.g. supplementary welfare allowance	2%
Other	1%
Don't know	1%
Nothing is preventing me/I don't want to	17%

Enabling factors for learning participation

As described in **Table 2**, respondents were asked to select from a list of options which supports had the potential to positively influence their future learning participation. Reflecting the most commonly cited barrier of limited time, 31% of

respondents supported greater flexibility in course scheduling, 22% would like time off work to engage in learning, and 24% would like fully or partially online learning options. Respondents recommended greater financial support (29%), encouragement from employers (9%), and assistance with childcare support (8%).

Table 2: Support to join a course or to participate in learning

Support	Percentage
If I could learn at a time that suited me	31%
If I could access financial support to cover all/some of the costs	29%
If it led to a qualification that employers recognise and value	26%
If I could learn either fully or partially online	24%
If I could get time off work to learn	22%
If my learning helped me earn more/gain a promotion	19%
If I could learn at a more convenient location	15%
If I could learn at weekends	13%
If I could learn somewhere I already know and feel comfortable	13%
If I knew that adults like me were doing the course	12%
If my line manager/employer encouraged me	9%
If I could get help with my digital skills	9%
If I could get support with childcare/other caring responsibilities	8%
If I had support to access digital equipment for online learning	8%
If I could get help with my illness/disability and/or mental health	6%
If I had support to access broadband for online learning	6%
If I could get help with reading, writing or numbers	2%
Other	1%
Don't know	4%
None of the above	8%

Barriers to Lifelong Learning Participation among Marginalised and Vulnerable Groups

The findings from a large national survey of 1,042 adults in Ireland identify several barriers to lifelong learning participation, including limited time, competing responsibilities, financial barriers and negative perceptions of ageing. Of note, this survey included a majority of respondents with third-level qualifications (51%), while few were unemployed and seeking work (6%), had exited formal education at age 16 or under (9%) or reported unpaid caring responsibilities (21%). Acknowledging the limitations of online surveys and applying randomised sampling strategies in engaging marginalised and vulnerable groups in research, we recruited an additional 59 participants, through community organisations, to participate in focus group discussions. The focus groups included lone parents, people with intellectual and physical disabilities, women impacted by addiction, people impacted by imprisonment, older adults and migrant women. The evidence gathered through focus groups with marginalised and vulnerable groups identified several barriers to lifelong learning participation. These barriers include: digital literacy, stigma and discrimination, isolation, prior negative experience in formal education, financial barriers, lack of childcare, a lack of choice in modules, course schedule design, a lack of certification or accreditation and an absence of hybrid learning options. The findings have implications for policy and practice, aiming to better support marginalised or vulnerable groups to participate in lifelong learning in Ireland.

Focus Group 1: Women affected by addiction - *“I was concerned that if I went on a course, any grant that I would get would affect my social and my rent.”*

The 2017 Adult Education Survey on adult learning in Ireland found that 36% of female respondents highlighted a lack of educational options available to them, compared with 29% of males (CSO 2017). Similarly, as the SOLAS Report (2021) highlights, most adults who continued in lifelong learning had high educational

attainment, indicative of high socioeconomic position, with more than 72% of participants previously completing third-level qualifications. Concerns around female and socioeconomically disadvantaged group participation in lifelong learning are compounded by the additional challenges faced by individuals affected by addiction. Research shows that women affected by addiction experience greater frequency of prison time served, gender-based violence, social care service involvement, state care history, homelessness, and lower educational and employment attainment (Nowotny et al., 2014; O’Neill, 2011). The SAOL Project runs a two-year training programme called BRIO (Building Recovery Inwards and Outwards) for participants who have issues with both addiction and criminality. Although women make up a relatively small proportion of the Irish prison population (9.4% in 2021), the literature consistently highlights that women in prison have different needs than their male peers (IPS, 2021; O’Neill, 2011; Abbott, 2018). Women impacted by imprisonment tend to do short sentences (6 months or less) and self-report poor health, inaccessibility of healthcare services, substance misuse and high levels of trauma (Abbott, 2018). Women affected by addiction represent a marginalised and vulnerable group and were recruited in this research project to explore the barriers they experience in lifelong learning participation (**Table 3**). In total, 15 women affected by addiction participated in this focus group. The group were of mean age 43 years and most exited formal education prior to completing the Leaving Certificate (54%). At the time of interview, four participants were enrolled in Community Employment Schemes, four were full-time parents, three were unemployed, and two participants were employed or in full-time education, with employment data missing for two participants.

Table 3: Emerging themes and supporting quotes from women affected by addiction

Theme	Supporting Quote
1. The value of tailored support services	“I had SAOL supporting me when I went to college last year to do social care and I’m going back this year to do Youth and Community Work... I would have never gone to college only for SAOL being there as a support for me the whole time.”
2. I.T. skills support	“I was doing a course at that time and I thought there was people on it who might be a bit rusty on the computer, maybe have a separate class for them so that they can get up to speed with things that might come up on the course.”
3. Financial barriers	“I was concerned that if I went on a course, any grant that I would get would affect my social and my rent. So, when you are means tested, you have to declare everything – grants and everything. So, I did start a course but then I was like, ‘no, I have to leave ‘cause I won’t be able to afford for my rent to change or the social so...’ that was a big reason for me leaving.”
4. Childcare supports	“There really are big, big supports here. And the creche as well - for anyone coming here with kids, you can put them in the creche. That’s amazing.”
5. Stigma and low confidence	“It’s when you are going through recovery and your emotions are all coming out. You’ve no confidence. Especially when you are coming out of prison. You’re stigmatised. Everywhere you go you are stigmatised... So that can put your confidence really low.”
6. Peer support	“It helps us to help other people who are in the position we used to be in and they see how far we are after coming through all this and helps them to take their first step. Even if they come in the door and have a cup of tea - it’s nice to... make them feel welcome. It inspires them.”
7. Domestic and gender-based violence support	“Coming from a domestic violence situation, your mind is not on courses at all. The domestic violence situation I was coming from, it was causing my addiction. But the domestic violence officer has helped me with that and then the addiction is being helped. You find a way forward, to come through - I’m coming out the other side now.”
8. Methadone clinic appointments	“A lot of the courses I would have done - the recovery courses - they would be aware that people have to get to their clinics and that on time but like, when you’re on dailies (term used for daily methadone collection), and you are going to a proper... course - I wouldn’t have time to get to my clinic so. Being on dailies is very hard.”
9. Course certification/ accreditation	“I always loved computers and the labour sent me on some course. It was pre-ECDL. And after doing the whole course, it wasn’t certified at the end of it. So, I was a bit annoyed at that.”

Considerations for policy and practice

- Fund and provide more support services for women in addiction recovery who are interested in pursuing education
- Acknowledge the intersectional barriers experienced by women who are accessing addiction support services and provide holistic, wrap-around support to ensure access to and completion of education
- Acknowledge concerns around the impact of course-specific payments on existing social welfare supports and allowances
- Provide trauma-informed care training to all staff in all addiction services to acknowledge service user history of stigma in formal services and education
- Promote peer-support programmes and initiatives to people with experience of addiction, imprisonment, and domestic and gender-based violence to increase trust, service engagement, and authenticity in person-centred service delivery
- Liaise with health providers to ensure learners accessing methadone clinics are provided with appointment times that are convenient to them, with a view to reducing course disruption
- Ensure learners are aware of whether courses are certified prior to enrolment to prevent demotivation and disengagement with adult education

Focus Group 2: People Impacted by Imprisonment - *“There’s nothing in [prison] that would make you say, ‘God, I can’t wait to get to class.’”*

In Ireland, it is estimated that over 50% of people in prison exited formal education before the age of 15 years (IPRT, 2022). Almost all prisoners (85%) have not completed second-level education and a majority have never completed a state exam (IPRT, 2022; Dillon et al., 2020). O’Donnell et al. (2008), found that Irish prisoners are 23 times more likely to come from areas with high socioeconomic deprivation, when compared to the least deprived areas. The destabilising and stigmatising effect of imprisonment on families and communities has been shown in national

and international literature, contributing to intergenerational recidivism and poverty (Rose et al., 2003; O’Donnell et al., 2008). Deprived socioeconomic conditions within this cohort are compounded by family conflict, physical and mental health issues, low levels of education and employment attainment, social stigma and isolation, poverty, and housing shortages (Day et al., 2011; Naser et al., 2006; Binswanger et al., 2011). Those with lower levels of education attainment are more likely to re-commit crimes and face imprisonment on multiple occasions (O’Donnell et al., 2008). Conversely, having access to and positive attitudes towards education can support a prisoner to cope through a prison sentence, prepare them for reintegration, and contribute towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and crime (Rose et al., 2003). People affected by imprisonment were recruited to participate in this research to explore their experience of barriers to education both within the prison setting and on release in the community (**Table 4**). A total of 9 participants took part in this focus group, including 6 women and 3 men. Participants included individuals on temporary release, day release and full-release from prison. With regards to employment status, two participants were employed, one was retired, one was unemployed, one was a full-time parent and one studied part-time, with employment data missing for three participants. The mean age of the group was 43 years. With regards to educational attainment, one participant had completed the Leaving Certificate, two completed a Level 5 award, one had completed a Level 6 award, one had a diploma (level unknown), and three had Level 8 degrees.

Table 4: Emerging themes and supporting quotes from people impacted by imprisonment

Theme	Supporting Quote
1. Need to co-design courses and empower learner voice	"I would like more options and I think some of the options here are ridiculous... I think students who come should have more of a say in what classes are on. Like, to ask us for ideas in what we might like to do rather than a page up on the wall and none of us are interested in half of it or maybe teachers not available."
2. Lack of therapeutic support in prison	"In there, there's nothing, especially for the likes who have addiction. I'd say 60 or 70% and they need help as well... rather than just leave you there and as for counselling and that, there's no help for anyone in there, literally no help for anyone.... no NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings."
3. Certification/ accreditation	"You could do any [course] and it could be a step to somewhere else but you don't have that step. You have no proof to say you have done anything. There are girls in there that have never gotten a cert in their life... If they were to get that little acknowledgement, it could really help them."
4. Course scheduling/ over-subscription of courses	"Teachers are off during the summer, that's when they should plan for the year to come. So, you don't start [the school term] with, 'there's 10 people down for it, sorry, there's too many'. You know, they should have a work plan for the future... with the curriculum."
5. Reintegration	"The experience I had in [prison name] was unreal and the young people I met there - like, it's a revolving door and I wouldn't bloody blame them calling it that cause they lock them in there and they give them no incentive for when they go out."
6. Peer support/ peer advocacy	"I'd love if there was a programme where ex-prisoners could go in who would know what the craic is, like what we are feeling... Like, when you go even, as a first timer - you have two chiefs walking around in their uniform and you are stuck at the back bawling 'cause you have no idea what's ahead of you and they're telling you a few things and you are not listening, 'cause they are in a uniform... you are afraid...."
7. Course quality	"I'm thinking of the young girls in there, young lassies going 'what the hell?' There's nothing for them, no incentive... There's nothing in there that would make you say, 'God, I can't wait to get to class.'"
8. The value of learner-centred education	"Like the addiction studies - a lot of the prisoners have drug problems, alcohol problems and I loved what I did on that level 5. I could relate to every bit of it and you know, you're learning as you go. You get little flashbacks like, 'oh yeah, that reminds me of that time,' you really relate to everything and you're just going, 'oh my god, that's what's been happening.'"
9. Lack of opportunities for progression	"I would have loved to go on to do the level 6 - I know that the 7 is straight into college but I would have loved to do the 6 just to go a bit deeper into it but that's not available."
10. Social isolation and trauma	"I was in there [isolation cell in prison] for 12 days... I nearly had a mental breakdown. I knew I was in prison and that was bad enough but this was mental torture. I will never ever forget them 12 days... You were like an animal. The door was barely left open and there was a box for food that was kicked into you. Nobody to talk to."
11. Stigma and discrimination	"I found out that I didn't get it [college course] and the reason they said I didn't get it was my Garda Vetting... It's because of my background... Because the way they just pushed me aside was ridiculous, you know?... But I had to expect all this sort of thing coming out of prison, you know?"

Considerations for policy and practice

- Promote the value of learner voice in the co-design of courses, including the variety of modules available in prison services or to people on Temporary or Day Release
- Focus groups unearthed considerable issues in the provision of adult education in prison settings including over-subscription of courses, lack of peer-led courses, absence of trauma-informed care training among practitioners, lack of therapeutic counselling services, and the obstacles presented by the Garda Vetting process
- Consider that the prison environment can be (re)traumatising, is not conducive to growth and recovery, and can hinder a person's motivation and ability to learn
- Implement and resource educational support services in prison, including offering course certification and accreditation, to assist the reintegration process post-release
- Invest in further research to explore the needs and wants of prisoners in terms of course delivery, with a key focus on capturing and empowering learner voice

Focus Group 3: Lone Parents

- *“Maybe they kind of suppose courses are still geared for young people, or professionals to kind of upgrade.”*

As the SOLAS Report (2021) highlights, there was a 21% decline, equating to 78,700 fewer learners, in lifelong learning participation in Quarter 4 2020 when compared to Quarter 4 in 2019. The report also noted that the number of female lifelong learning participants had declined by 23%, or almost 51,000 learners. Additional barriers to education have been observed amongst lone parents, a disproportionately female group in Ireland, with 86.4% of one parent families headed by a mother (One Family, 2022). According to the ESRI, lone parents are a significantly marginalised group, experiencing increased vulnerability to disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, specifically unaffordability of housing, overcrowding and homelessness (ESRI, 2022). This is supported by research from One Family, a government-funded organisation for lone parents in Ireland, who report “one-parent families are approximately 2.5 times as likely to be living in enforced deprivation as two-parent

families” (2022). The comparatively higher rate of deprivation experienced by lone parents in Ireland, as well as the disproportionate number of women comprising this group, places them at greater risk of educational disadvantage and provides the rationale for their inclusion in this project. While efforts have been made across Education and Training Boards to increase access to childcare supports, the AONTAS Annual Synthesis Report 2021-2022 highlights that a majority of lone parents (51%) were unaware of the availability of childcare support within their respective Education and Training Boards (AONTAS, 2022). Lone parents are likely to experience additional barriers to lifelong learning participation, which requires a tailored response. Therefore, we aimed to explore the barriers to lifelong learning participation in this group, with implications for policy and practice. We conducted a focus group with three participants, all of whom were stay-at-home parents within one-parent families, of mean age 51 years, and all had a third-level degree or equivalent. Key barriers to lifelong learning participation are outlined in **Table 5**.

Table 5: Emerging themes and supporting quotes from lone parents

Theme	Supporting Quote
1. Course scheduling options	“And I’ve thought many times about doing courses but do you know what, like most of the free stuff or the cheaper courses, they are usually evening courses. They are very very bad timing. When you have to put your kid to bed, when you have to have dinner... It can be hard to find someone to mind him at that time. A lot of times that has stopped me to do something.”
2. Childcare	“When she was smaller... she could go to the creche after school... I was lucky enough to get a grant so that helped with that cost... because [the course] was evening time, initially I was hoping to get somebody to come here and mind her. I tried everyone I knew. It just didn’t work out for me. That was my main thing was the childcare.”
3. Course schedule design	“I think parents should really be a big part of it (course schedule design) because I think, like many parents... you go back to work, but often you can’t keep doing the jobs that you were doing before because they don’t fit in, so I think parents... are interested in doing a course, because... we need to take a little bit of a different...path.”
4. The need for hybrid learning options	“Going on a Zoom class when you’ve got children at home is not ideal. But it’s certainly better than having to find childcare and leave them at home and go to college. But I think it’s very important to have in-class, physical learning, which could be done in the mornings.”
5. Technology/digital upskilling	“I’ve applied for a Springboard course. It’s during the day and it’s hybrid. But like I am a bit stressed about the tech side of it.”
6. Lack of confidence	“[I would like to be able to do an access/introductory course] just to give you your confidence back.”
7. Breastfeeding facilities	“[Breastfeeding] doesn’t seem to ever be taken into account... not with the timing or the like allowance for childcare or anything. Maybe they kind of suppose courses are still geared for young people, or professionals to kind of upgrade.”
8. Financial barriers to learning	“The hybrid model’s ideal, except for, with lone parents, obviously finances are a challenge. I have found that and it’s so frustrating... I think for me the biggest challenge is financing tech, and then financing books or financing course materials. It’s great if the fees are paid, but there’s all the other expenses as well.”

Considerations for policy and practice

- Ensure courses are delivered flexibly in order to accommodate the particular childcare requirements of lone parents. This should include hybrid delivery and diverse ranging courses being delivered at different times of the day and week
- Hybrid-learning provides flexibility to lone parents, however, there is a need to consider the financial resources required to engage in online learning, including access to digital tools and learning materials
- Promote access and awareness of childcare supports and grants available to lone-parents (both before programme commencement and throughout course delivery)
- Practitioners should promote the provision of digital support services prior to course commencement
- Acknowledge the additional challenges associated with a return to education for lone parents, including confidence-building, technology readiness and competing time-demands
- Develop and implement policies across Education and Training Boards to ensure access to breastfeeding facilities and promote awareness among practitioners and providers

Focus Group 4: People with disabilities

- *'I would have liked a hybrid-learning option'*

It is widely acknowledged that people with disabilities experience greater challenges in lifelong learning participation. Research by AONTAS showed that learners with disabilities reported greater dissatisfaction with their home learning environment during the Covid-19 pandemic (AONTAS, 2020). In this AONTAS 2020 survey, almost half of participants with disabilities (47%) agreed with the statement “I struggle with a lack of structure to my day” and 39% reported experiencing difficulty in finding the motivation to learn. This echoes similar findings from AHEAD, who identified a lack of structure and motivation as the most prominent barrier to at-home learning (AHEAD, 2020) for learners with disabilities. Furthermore, the report found that 42% of learners with disabilities experienced poor mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to an overall prevalence of 32%. Similarly, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) found that students with disabilities experienced a greater burden of mental health issues, in addition to a lack of daily structure or routine associated with remote learning (USI, 2020). Given that lower rates of lifelong learning participation are reported among people with disabilities, there is a need to understand their experience of adult education, including the additional challenges that they face. Learners with physical and intellectual disabilities were invited to take part in this research study, and the findings represent their perspective of barriers to lifelong learning participation (**Table 6**). Overall, 18 people with intellectual and physical disabilities participated in three focus groups, with mean age 32 years, and 50% identified as female.

Table 6: Emerging themes and supporting quotes from people with disabilities

Theme	Supporting Quote
1. Absence of hybrid learning options	“I would have liked [a hybrid learning] option ... I would have liked to do maybe two days a week in person, or three days a week when I’m actually in doing the Zoom... but that wasn’t an option in our school anyway.”
2. Isolation and social interaction	“I’m telling you, if [Covid-19 pandemic] did happen again... I think I would like if the key workers came out more to their key students.... It was very difficult just [seeing support working staff] once a week.”
3. Lack of consistency in the mode of teaching and learning across schools in response to the Covid-19 pandemic	“[the government] let schools choose on how they want to do it. I think it would have worked a lot better if the government had more of a say in the ways schools do things. Some (schools) were doing Zoom, others were not. It was all very chaotic for everyone... ‘cause a lot of schools just ended up doing everything different and [it was] really stressful then.”
4. Use of digital platforms	“Instead of sending the (school) work out through the post... we could do it all online, like we could do it on Google classroom or something like that. Where... the teacher can correct our work and tell us what we need to do. But in our case, we got all of it sent to us, and then we had to send it back to them.”
5. Equipment for home learning	“Well, obviously if you had the computer and you could get on with what you are doing, that would make [home learning] easier.”
6. At-home learning environment	“I had to sit in three different places when they first started doing Zoom. I tried sitting in a chair in the sitting room. And then I tried to sit in my wheelchair. And then... I had to sit in the kitchen and wear headphones. And for when I was in the workshop, I was in the sitting room. I just had the iPad on a pillow.”
7. Stress associated with high volume of course work	“[During the Covid-19 pandemic, the tutors] sent out a lot of work Cause you could actually see the work so it was super stressful.... like you could actually see the amount of it that had to be done, so it ended up stressing me out.”

Considerations for policy and practice

- Offer hybrid-learning options to learners with disabilities/different abilities
- Utilise and adequately resource online teaching platforms to support the completion of coursework and use of effective feedback mechanisms
- Support the delivery of assistive technology, including equipping learners with the tools necessary to learn at home
- Ensure consistency in the implementation of public health measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic or other health emergencies across centres and Education and Training Boards
- Ensure there are appropriate mechanisms in place to maintain social interaction and prevent social isolation during online-learning courses e.g. home visits by key workers
- Awareness-raising around posting high volumes of coursework to learners, including the potential negative impact on general wellbeing
- Consider evidence-based frameworks to improve the design and delivery of programmes, for example Universal Design for Learning

Focus Group 5: Older adults

– “[The tutor] was teaching them the way you would teach primary school children... I think it was more ageism”

Given that no respondents to the Learning and Work Institute Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey were aged 65 years or older and that older adults are underrepresented in adult learning, in-depth focus group discussions with this cohort were conducted. As the SOLAS report (2021) highlights, “at 16%, the participation rate for 25-34-year-olds was more than double that of 55-64-year-olds (7%).” Additionally, the digital divide is more pronounced in older age groups. Having reduced access to digital skills, devices, and digital literacy places older adults at a significant disadvantage when it comes to course access, retention, and completion. This is particularly relevant in the context of remote and hybrid learning, where much tutor-led and self-directed learning relies on the use of digital devices and skills. SOLAS’ 2020 report, “Digital Skills Requirements of Workers in Ireland,” found that over a third (36%) of workers in Ireland aged 55-64 years reported a digital skills gap (6). Older adults’ fears of exclusion due to digital skills gaps have been highlighted by AONTAS’ research in recent years, including the CEN Census: Community Education in a time of COVID-19 report (2020), and the regional reports of the National FET Learner Forum. For example, older people were found to have been disproportionately affected by digital poverty. As one respondent to the Community Education Census survey in 2020 noted, “[i]t has been challenging recruiting older persons to online delivery as many experience digital poverty and lack of digital skill.” While the global population is ageing, Fragoso and Fonseca (2022) assert that ageism is the most prevalent form of discrimination in Europe occurring in all forms of institutions, including as bias from adult educators. Ageism in educational settings has been shown to act as a barrier to older people’s

lifelong learning participation and warrants further exploration (Yi – Yin, 2011). Additional barriers cited for this cohort include a lack of confidence and lower self-esteem (Yi-Yin, 2011). This report includes focus groups with older adults with a view to finding solutions to the problem of the digital skills gap, ageism, internalised ableism, and lower self-esteem and its impact on educational access (**Table 7**).

Four people participated in this group, one of whom was the gatekeeper who is a leading representative of their active retirement community. All participants were female and the mean age of the group was 73 years. Three participants were retired and one was employed. In terms of education attainment, two participants had third level degrees and two had completed primary-level education.

Table 7. Emerging themes and supporting quotes from older adults

Theme	Supporting Quote
1. Ageism	<p>“Because [the tutor] thought age meant that they didn’t know anything, she was teaching them the way she would teach primary school children. And the numbers just gradually fell off. I think it was more ageism. The people who are coming here... they just wanted to be together and show their work and be encouraged... but the teacher thought she was going to teach them... I think they should be trained. Because somebody’s in their 60s and 70s, they still have a huge amount to offer.”</p>
2. Previous negative experiences in formal education	<p>“That’s what this class was supposed to help us ended up humiliating us and putting us down. My mother was sent forms and told, I’m an “idler” or I’m “lazy.” And I’m “this and that.” And my mother said the worst thing she said was, “I sent my beautiful blue-eyed blonde girl to school happy. And she comes home a wreck.” Every nun in the school said that to me. “Oh, here’s the blue eyed, happy girl. Happy, are you? Happy?” And I used to say, “No.” So that was... I’m getting emotional. I don’t want to but that’s my experience of school. And it didn’t change in the [FET center]. It didn’t change, not one little bit ... The fear of the child is still in me, it’s still there.”</p>
3. Dyslexia awareness training for adult education practitioners	<p>“And I said, “But I told you, I have [dyslexia].” She says, “that doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter. You’ll be fine.” No teacher sat and said, ‘What’s your problem?’ None of them.”</p>
4. Class sizes	<p>“I did an I.T. course... and quite a few people in the room, reasonably large class and the few of us said the same thing, that the teacher, it was very, very hard to get, you know, if you were stuck in something, or something even something silly... it’s very hard to get the teacher’s attention... But I just stopped going because I just got fed up. Because there’s not much point.”</p>
5. Basic digital literacy courses	<p>“They taught you how to - very basic, it was really good, even if you want to get through to a government office... And the person that did it was a very basic person. ... she wasn’t I.T. She was just very good. She had done some little exam, obviously to teach the basics. Very laid back. And there was four or five of us only (in the class), and it was really really good.”</p>
6. The need for tailored learner-centred adult education provision	<p>“A huge number of people... would have tried adult education, and found that it didn’t meet their needs... the normal adult literacy provision that’s provided is very, very good and works very well but more so for people who have missed out, you know, maybe kids who never got to go, who didn’t go to school, but who didn’t have a specific difficulty. If you have a specific difficulty... you need specific teaching.”</p>
7. Internalised ableism	<p>“I did think about courses, but I thought I was too stupid to do it. Because I couldn’t write, I couldn’t spell and I was deaf. Two hearing aids. So I thought I was too stupid to get a course... I would love to be educated.”</p>

Considerations for policy and practice

- There is a need to combat tutor and teacher bias, including negative perceptions of older adults’ abilities to engage in adult learning
- Adult education staff must use adult learning principles and teaching methodologies designed for the field of adult learning. This should include recognising the value of life experience
- Previous negative experience in formal education was identified as a barrier to lifelong learning participation among older adult participants. Ensure adult learning opportunities represent safe spaces where all learners feel respected
- Provide one-to-one support for digital skills and avoid overcrowding I.T. courses or programmes
- Tailor courses and programmes to the individual needs of learners, acknowledging the heterogeneity of older and younger adults
- Create targeted campaigns which promote the inclusivity of adult education targeting older adults, especially those with prior negative school experience

Focus Group 6: Migrant women

– *“Meeting people outside of the community and getting education, joining groups, doing short courses... because everybody in Direct Provision is traumatised... you need something else outside of that space.”*

National statistics reveal a drop in Further Education and Training (FET) participation levels of 15% among refugees and International Protection Applicants (IPAs) during 2020 (SOLAS, 2021). In the AONTAS Annual Synthesis report 2021-2022, migrant groups made up a significant proportion of those who engaged in the regional Forums. Those born outside of Ireland represented 19% of Forum participants; 8% of participants were non-native English speakers, and 6% stated they live in Direct Provision. While these groups reported a host of benefits including improved English language ability, English language learners highlighted a lack support and the need for additional class hours (AONTAS, 2022). Additionally, learners emphasised the importance of cross-cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in certain centres (AONTAS, 2022).

Of note, there remains no national policy on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) from which learners entering education courses can draw on their previous experiences and qualifications, to be exempt from certain modules or have their qualifications recognised in Ireland (AONTAS, 2021). While a lack of RPL policy and practice impacts a broad range of learners, those with migration backgrounds are disproportionately affected, representing barriers to educational progression and integration (Villarruel et al., 2001). Comparing some of the marginalised groups with the non-marginalised group in the regional forum reports, those living in Direct Provision faced considerable barriers, expressing 28% lower satisfaction with financial supports and childcare supports, respectively. Additionally, work placement issues are particularly challenging for migrants who may not have pre-established connections within their new communities. While recent legislation has increased access permissions to certain colleges and courses, IPAs continue to face barriers to education access based on Labour Market Access Permissions’ sizeable international student fees requirements (MASI, 2019; ICCL, 2022). Considering the myriad of barriers faced by migrants in Ireland, particularly International Protection Applicants, migrant women, mostly living in Direct Provision, were recruited to share their lived experience of barriers to educational access in Ireland (**Table 8**).

Ten people participated in this group, one of whom was the gatekeeper and a leading representative among the community of migrant women recruited for this study. The mean age of this group was 38 years. Two participants were working full-time, one was working part-time, one was a full-time carer, one was in full-time education and the remaining five were unemployed. In terms of education attainment, three participants had third-level degrees from their country of origin, two participants had completed a Leaving Certificate or equivalent, three had diplomas or certificates (levels unknown), one person had completed a post-graduate diploma and one person was currently enrolled in third-level education.

Table 8. *Emerging themes and supporting quotes from migrant women*

Theme	Supporting Quote
1. Trauma-informed care training	<p>“Because you have people coming from different countries, different religion, different ethnicity and race, with different situation from a different country ... Those people doing the interview, working with asylum seeker[s], or refugee[s]... like they really need to be trauma-informed, because it will allow you to be more empathic with people. It’s not like you’re taking away their problem... but you’re giving them space to heal. It allows people to be themselves, take all the necessary steps that they need to move from where they are to the next.”</p>
2. Isolation	<p>“So, meeting people outside of the community and getting education, joining groups, doing short courses, like doing something else outside of the Direct Provision, because everybody in Direct Provision is traumatised... your next-door person might be having a language barrier and might not have anything to say to you, or both of you just sit down and talk about children and talk about asylum and that drains you. So, you need something else outside of that space.”</p>
3. Childcare	<p>“I know a lot of women; they’re not going to school... because of the situation of having small kids. But if there’s a childcare inside the college... that would work better for - I think most mothers, especially as African mothers... they’re just having difficulties in, not being on the right path. I think it would help a lot actually.”</p>
4. Lack of ESOL classes in Direct Provision centres	<p>“[People living in Direct Provision Centre] used to have one (ESOL class), and it was really very beneficial. But during COVID, those classes stopped. If it’s possible for them - for those classes to come back now be very, very good. Because there are some of the women that can’t leave your room because they are small babies, there is the issue of transportation to go for any English classes outside of the DP.”</p>
5. Inadequate transport to and from rural Direct Provision centres	<p>“You know, with the transport system, going from here to (name of area where centre bus drops them), I think it goes just twice a day. It’s not going to fit to the time we go to school and coming back from school won’t be able to make it with the bus.”</p>
6. Systemic oppression/ fear of speaking out	<p>“You’re supposed to be grateful that you’re here (in Direct Provision). If you see... something that happens, you kind of count it as ‘one of those things,’ even though you know within yourself that it is... and chances are that if you talk too much, you might be transferred to a different place. So, you’re already building connection in your local town and the person is just required to... tolerate as much as you can... So, you just kind of, you know, take it.”</p>
7. Lack of recognition of prior learning (RPL)	<p>“It wasn’t just that the degree wasn’t recognised, your work experience was not even recognised. So, it’s as if you’re starting from rock bottom, like all over, and then, you kind of don’t even have the chance to even try because you feel like there is no opportunity to say that you can use your existing skill, or your knowledge.”</p>
8. Disproportionately higher fees for international students in Direct Provision	<p>“Because we were living in Direct Provision, only if you’re a migrant, you’re meant to be like international fee, which of course, you don’t have a receiving €28 a week - how do you pay 15 grand to upskill?”</p>

Theme	Supporting Quote
<p>9. Assertive engagement and advertisement of services and support</p>	<p>“There are all of the services in the community that’s helping our mental health, education and all of that, but the people in Direct Provision don’t really know the support. The people living in Direct Provision will not have the courage to go into any offices to ask for help because they don’t know how, and there’s the language barrier, there’s the stress of even leaving your room. It takes courage to actually leave your room when you’re in Direct Provision. Being able to meet the people really offering the services, you know, putting a face to the service. Some people will go into the services and ask but that’s maybe like 2 or 3% of the people. You (services) need to take that step, go into the centre, put a face to the services and say, ‘these are the services we offer. We are here to help you.’”</p>

Considerations for policy and practice

- Acknowledging that a significant proportion of those seeking asylum in Ireland will have complex traumas, ensure access to free trauma-informed therapeutic support, to promote lifelong learning participation and reduce intergenerational trauma
- Promote the value of learner voice initiatives to capture the experience of this group in lifelong learning and to alleviate fears of speaking out among people living in Direct Provision
- Ensure there is adequate, accessible and free childcare options for those living in Direct Provision to allow parents to participate in lifelong learning and to integrate in society
- Provide hybrid ESOL courses, ensuring class sizes are appropriate and available at the levels required by learners
- Increase ESOL learning opportunities for refugees and migrants
- As financial barriers impede lifelong learning participation among women living in Direct Provision, provide assistance with food and travel costs associated with course attendance
- There is a need for cross-departmental dialogue in response to learners in rural Direct Provision centres reporting inadequate transport to educational centres
- Review RPL system for those living in Direct Provision who have prior educational and employment experience from their country of origin
- Create a national RPL policy to ensure fairness and consistency in RPL across Ireland

- Increase the number of scholarships available to ensure refugees and migrants have equitable access to lifelong learning opportunities
- Systemic oppression and isolation were identified as barriers to lifelong participation. There is a need to promote community outreach work by education providers and support services with Direct Provision centres

Discussion of Key Findings

This report aimed to describe lifelong learning participation among adults in Ireland, with a focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups. The findings of the Learning and Work Institute Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey, commissioned by AONTAS, show that 65% of adults aged between 17-64 years participated in learning within the last 3 years in Ireland. When compared to the findings from the Learning and Work Institute UK surveys, the participation rate in Ireland is substantially higher, with the participation rate for the most recent UK survey being 44%. The UK-based surveys however, include adults up to 75 years old, while the survey presented in this report included adults up to 64 years, impeding the comparability of the findings. In this population, several factors were found to positively influence lifelong learning participation including being employed, living in Dublin, higher educational attainment, higher age when exiting formal education, higher occupation class and younger age. The findings from this national survey support a growing body of evidence confirming a Matthew Effect in education, implying that individuals who experience greater participation and progression in formal education

at earlier phases of life continue to observe greater educational participation in adulthood (Bağcı, 2019).

Acknowledging the limitations of online surveys in engaging underserved and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups in research, we aimed to capture the barriers to lifelong learning participation among marginalised and vulnerable groups through in-depth focus group discussion. Six cohorts of marginalised and vulnerable groups were recruited to participate in this study, including lone parents, migrant women, older adults, people with physical and intellectual disabilities, people affected by imprisonment, and women affected by addiction. The findings, emerging from focus group discussions, indicate a range of overarching and cohort-specific factors which prevent marginalised and vulnerable groups from participating in learning across the lifespan. All of the participants included in this study have experienced forms of social and economic disadvantage (including poverty, lack of access to employment, and social stigma) that have affected their access to and experience in education. The findings identify multi-layered and interrelated barriers to education among marginalised and vulnerable groups in Ireland. While for many people, adult learning represents a place of healing, the marginalised and vulnerable cohorts consulted in this research reported experiencing stigma, discrimination and low confidence in their course or programme. Our focus group data revealed difficulties not only with accessing and completing educational courses for marginalised and vulnerable learners, but the significance of emotional, social, and psychological factors, such as respect, autonomy, and feelings of belonging, in influencing the overall quality of a person's experience within education and the likelihood of their continued, lifelong participation in learning.

The results from the focus group discussions, alongside the online survey findings, present a picture of multi-layered and interrelated barriers to participating in education for adults in Ireland. Although the Learning and Work Institute found that almost two-thirds of the adults they surveyed stated that they were likely to take up learning in the next three years, there are still significant barriers to learning which affect more marginalised and underserved populations. Vulnerable groups are also less likely to have

their experiences captured by online surveys, given the difficulties with digital poverty, digital skills, and access to digital devices shared by the participants in our focus groups. 51% of the participants surveyed had a university (undergraduate or postgraduate) qualification. Additionally, 75% of the respondents were employed and 71% of respondents lived in urban areas. As such, the survey findings reflect the experiences of learning participation of relatively affluent populations with access to university-level education and employment. Despite discrepancies between the survey and focus group demographics, however, some common themes emerged across the focus group and survey data. Both samples raised financial support and hybrid learning options as important for facilitating learning participation. Among surveyed learners, 30% said that financial support would facilitate their continued learning, and 20% said that the option to learn fully or partially online would support them to take part in education. Additionally, 31% of surveyed learners identified course scheduling as an important factor, stating that they would like to learn “at a time that suited me.” In terms of barriers to education, 25% of respondents said that affordability prevented them from taking part in learning. In contrast to the focus group findings, only 5% of the cohort surveyed by the Learning and Work Institute selected “an illness or disability” as a barrier to learning; similarly, 4% and 3% of respondents reported “a lack of digital skills/confidence for online training” and a “negative experience of learning in the past” as barriers, respectively. The findings from the focus groups conducted with marginalised and vulnerable communities will be expanded on throughout this section.

Lone Parents

Lone parents are likely to experience several barriers to lifelong learning participation. The Central Statistics Office 2021 Pulse Survey found that 48% of lone parents said that they often experience judgemental attitudes or exclusion as a lone parent. Additionally, 68% of lone parents responding to the same survey said that they are often under financial pressure (Central Statistics Office, 2021). Supporting these statistical findings, the theme of exclusion emerged in our focus group consultation with this cohort, with learners reporting an absence of adequate childcare facilities, unsuitable course scheduling, digital

poverty, and a lack of personal confidence as barriers to their participation in education.

The predominant issues which affected lone parents trying to access education related broadly to the incompatibility of most course timetables with parenting responsibilities, a lack of access to childcare, and a lack of affordability of educational courses, compounding the financial burdens already experienced by one-parent families. Other related themes specific to this cohort emerged in the findings. The scheduling of courses, particularly affordable, free, or part-time courses, in the evening time as opposed to the daytime, presented difficulties for parents who had children at home and had to put them to bed in the evening time. This was connected to the wider problem of childcare, raised by a number of lone parents. Childcare was raised as an issue both in terms of affordability and availability; some participants felt that they could not pursue an educational course either because they could not find someone to take care of their children while they were studying or due to the unaffordability of formal childcare provision.

Notably, childcare was identified as a barrier to educational participation by a number of the cohorts consulted as part of this study. The absence of adequate childcare facilities was noted in focus group discussions with migrant women. In a worldwide context, a lack of childcare provision can be seen to exacerbate the continuing disparity between men and women's access to lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2020). Childcare issues are also relevant to women affected by addiction. Acknowledging this, the SAOL project provides childcare services in addition to educational courses and rehabilitation supports, which was perceived as invaluable by participants. Importantly, the women utilising this support highlighted the importance of on-site childcare to their continued participation in education.

The child-friendliness (or lack thereof) of learning spaces was further raised in discussions with lone parents, with focus group participants describing the difficulties they faced accessing breastfeeding facilities. While legislation exists providing protection to those in the workforce who are breastfeeding, no such protection exists for those in education (HSE, 2016). Access to breastfeeding facilities are available through some Education and Training Boards (ETBs), but

are not consistently applied across all Colleges of Further Education, Third Level Institutions, and Community Education Centres within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science. The lack of breastfeeding facilities, combined with a lack of understanding of the responsibilities of a nursing parent in learning spaces highlighted the exclusion of breastfeeding parents from education. The resulting impact of the absence of childcare facilities in educational spaces is likely more pronounced among women, who represent 86% of lone parents in Ireland (National Women's Council, 2021). Importantly, the European Institute for Gender Equality's 2019 report notes that "the availability and affordability of formal childcare services are important factors, as Member States with a higher provision of formal childcare for children below 3 years of age also had greater participation of women and men in the labour market and in lifelong-learning activities."

Lone-parent participants felt that, because of scheduling and the lack of childcare facilities, most educational courses were geared towards "young professionals." Similarly, this sentiment was reflected in findings from the Learning and Work Institute Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey, which highlighted higher learning participation among those in employment, with younger age and higher educational attainment. This is important as the European Institute for Gender Equality (2019) found a marginally lower rate of participation in educational courses among unemployed (11%) versus employed (9%) women. More notable, however, is the significantly lower lifelong educational participation rate of persons with lower than secondary education. Only 4% of men and women with lower than secondary-level education participated in lifelong learning activities in 2017 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019), and, as Czhen and Bradshaw (2012) noted, in Ireland, the percentage of lone parents with secondary education or lower is high compared with other European countries. This is supported by research conducted by Murray and Byrne who describe Ireland as a country where "the share of lone parents with a lower secondary education or below is high" (41%) (Byrne & Murray, 2020). Therefore, the active inclusion of lone parents in lifelong learning participation remains an urgent priority, with the provision of childcare and breast-feeding facilities integral to their participation.

Other barriers experienced by lone parents included a lack of flexibility in relation to course scheduling and modes of learning, with more flexible course schedules and hybrid learning options suggested as solutions to these challenges. Greater availability of part-time courses during the day, as well as the option to avail of hybrid learning, could support more lone parents to participate in learning. This widening of access, however, would ideally be facilitated by improved digital skills and greater ease of access to the digital devices necessary to participate in hybrid learning. Prospective learners require both the digital skills and the financial resources needed to own and use digital devices as part of their learning. The provision of grants and device loans would help to ameliorate the financial barriers to education experienced by lone parents. Lone parents in Ireland can currently avail of a One Parent Family Payment at a maximum rate of €220 per week if their youngest child is under the age of seven, but this payment does not include a specific provision for digital devices (Government of Ireland, 2023). Digital device loans are available through Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and as part of the REACH Fund, but device loans are rolled out on an individual ETB basis, and are not consistently applied across all Colleges of Further Education, Third Level Institutions, and Community Education Centres within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science. As it currently stands, lone parents can apply to individual charities and/or ETBs to avail of laptop and digital device loan schemes, but at present, no national policy or framework for ameliorating digital poverty among lone parents exists.

People with Disabilities

Our research found that the learning experiences of persons with physical and intellectual disabilities were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity of remote learning. Participants with disabilities highlighted a lack of additional learning support and social connection during the pandemic, as well as unsuitable at-home learning environments. Overall, the findings from focus groups with this cohort reflect a need for structured learning support and reinforce in-person contact with education providers and peers, participants felt this was crucial to learning enjoyment and

success. Participants reported experiencing difficulties when they had reduced contact with educational support staff and key workers. For many of the participants with disabilities, social connection and peer support are strong motivating factors in pursuing an educational course. As such, the social isolation and related negative impact on mental health caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was more pronounced among this cohort.

Without the in-person support of peers and tutors, learners in this cohort experienced increased stress related to workloads. Additionally, in some cases, at-home learning environments lacked sufficient space, privacy, and proper device set-up, leaving learners with physical and intellectual disabilities at a disadvantage when participating in remote and digital learning. Other learners felt that hybrid learning, specifically the use of digital learning platforms to assign and correct work, could be expanded and improved upon, as some preferred to work this way. Finally, learners raised inconsistent communication and public health measures enacted throughout the pandemic as sources of confusion and disruption to their learning.

The Economic and Social Research Institute's 2015 analysis of the educational and employment experiences of people with disabilities, reinforces the value of lifelong learning participation for this group, noting:

“Adult education is important to people with early-onset disability because this group tends to have left school with a lower level of qualifications than those whose disability does not emerge until later in life. Among those with later-onset disability, the higher proportion leaving a job because of their disability suggests that at least a proportion of this group will need retraining for a different line of work” (Watson et al, 2015).

Participants consulted in focus groups, highlighted the negative impact of high volumes of coursework on general wellbeing and stress. This was exacerbated throughout the pandemic when coursework, delivered by post, represented a physical reminder of course-related workloads

while at home. Overall, participants with physical and intellectual disabilities described several important considerations for learning practitioners to better support their educational experience. This qualitative study adds to the emerging evidence highlighting the social and personal reasons adults with disabilities pursue education (AHEAD, 2020; USI, 2020), including the barriers that may impede their participation.

Older Adults

Given the national survey of adult learning in Ireland, described in this report, did not include any participants aged 65 years and older, the focus groups provide important findings on lifelong learning participation for this demographic. Themes that emerged in our focus group discussion with older adults complemented broader findings on the educational experiences of this cohort in European and global contexts. Specifically, themes of underrepresentation compared to other age groups, disadvantage in terms of digital skills, and ageism as a barrier to educational participation arose in the discussion. Several core themes related to ageism, ableism, negative prior educational experiences, and digital disadvantage emerged through the focus group discussion, supporting findings by SOLAS (2020), AONTAS (2020), Fragoso and Fonseca (2022), and Yi-Yin (2011) that the risk of exclusion due to ageism and/or digital skills disadvantage is higher for older adults in educational settings.

Although factors of ageism and digital disadvantage impacting older adults in education have been documented in an international context (Fragoso and Fonseca, 2022), perhaps more relevant in the context of Ireland is older adults' prior negative experiences with school and the impact that this has had on their confidence and the likelihood of their pursuing lifelong learning. Conor Thompson has discussed the impact of negative educational experiences on mature students with disabilities in a Higher Education setting in Ireland, writing that, "for older learners re-entering education later in life, the experiences of a school system that was previously much less supportive or inclusive impacts their studies in Higher Education" (2021). The experience of a harsh, unsupportive education system may lead some older adults to approach education re-entry with self-doubt or fear, Thompson (2021) concludes. Self-doubt and fear were apparent in the cohort we consulted,

with one learner remarking, "I did think about courses, but I thought I was too stupid to do it."

Related to unsupportive educational experiences in the past were humiliation and internalised ableism as barriers to present-day participation in education. Learners explained how they had experienced a lack of support for and understanding of learning disabilities, or learning difficulties, such as dyslexia. Additionally, learners felt that oversubscribed class sizes prevented them from getting the individual support from tutors they needed. Greater access to individual, tailored support for older adults with specific difficulties and learning disabilities would help to change their perception of education as a harsh, exclusionary space. Connected to this, older adults felt that they are at a disadvantage compared to younger cohorts when it comes to digital skills, and felt that the provision of more digital skills training aimed at older adults would help them to feel more competent and confident in educational courses.

Migrant women

A range of themes from the discussion with migrant women will be discussed in this section, however, participants shared their experiences of several interlinking barriers to education participation and had suggestions to alleviate these challenges in areas such as: accessible and affordable childcare; English classes of varying levels that are hybrid or on-site at Direct Provision centers; accessible and reliable transport to education centers; and communication and fair treatment from management in Direct Provision centers.

As of January 2022, there were approximately 7000 people living in Direct Provision (IPAS, 2022). The living conditions in reception centers in the countries people seek refuge in, particularly within the Direct Provision system in Ireland, may not always be conducive to recovery and growth (MASI, 2019). A lack of communication and fair treatment from management in Direct Provision centers were issues highlighted, with notable caution, by this group. There was a fear among focus group participants that speaking about Direct Provision centre issues would have potential negative ramifications for them. In acknowledgement of extensive issues with the Direct Provision system in Ireland, the government have made a commitment to

end it – an endeavor which has stalled due to ongoing migration challenges (IRC, 2022). Until this happens, residents in Direct Provision may continue to face a myriad of difficulties, many of which may impede their ability to engage in lifelong learning. As one participant shared in relation to accessing an education course while in Direct Provision:

“There is no communication in this place, unfortunately. If anything should happen, that the driver is not available to take people to there, they’re not going to know about it, because... the manager just won’t communicate that to the relevant people... there are times when you feel that you’d rather not rock the boat, you know, just be quiet and take what you’re given. Because if you do say something... it’s a very touchy subject.”

Trauma informed care and practice is a growing movement that aims to increase the empathy and understanding of those working with vulnerable groups, it builds on the resilience of traumatised people, and reduces the risk of victims being re-traumatised when accessing services (Miller et al., 2019). Participants in this group recommended that these trainings should be delivered to all sections of society working with migrants including those working in government, in Direct Provision centres and tutors, as supported by the Irish Refugee Council (IRC) (2022). The need for the delivery of this training to anyone working with marginalised groups was echoed by other groups in this research, namely those affected by addiction and imprisonment. Given that a core ethos of adult education is the promotion of learner wellbeing, training in trauma informed care should be a priority in the adult educator’s continuous professional development.

While the move to allow those living in Direct Provision gain greater access to Further and Higher Education has been welcomed, significant barriers to access continue. An International Protection Applicant (IPA) must wait three years, or acquire a work permit or formal refugee status, if they wish to avoid paying international fees for Higher Education. This represents a significant barrier to lifelong learning participation among

this group, given that an adult resident of Direct Provision receives €28 per week (ICCL, 2022). There is a need for an equal and equitable approach to the implementation of international fee waivers for all migrants, irrespective of country of origin, to ensure education equality for all (IRC, 2022).

Similar to previous findings from focus groups with other marginalised and vulnerable groups, migrant participants shared how a lack of childcare provision impeded their ability to apply for courses. While findings from the Learning and Work Institute Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey suggest that childcare acts as a barrier for 8% of adults, findings from the focus groups consistently highlight the absence of childcare support as impeding educational access for marginalised and vulnerable groups. Acknowledging that a majority (63%) of people who arrived in Ireland in 2021 seeking International Protection were women and children, funding should be allocated to ensure there is adequate, accessible and free childcare options for those living in Direct Provision to allow parents to participate in lifelong learning and society (ECRE, 2022).

Participants in this group shared how their work and educational experiences in their countries of origin have gone unrecognised in Ireland and how this has impeded their integration efforts. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is defined as a process whereby prior learning is given a value by evaluating an individual’s skills and knowledge in the context of certain standards, competencies and learning outcomes (European Commission, 2008; NQAI, 2005; OECD, 2010). Work is being done to compile a framework for educational institutions in Ireland to deliver a unified RPL process but until a national policy is developed, educators and the labour market will work independently of one another, and migrants risk further exclusion from meaningful work and education (AONTAS, 2022; IRC, 2022).

Women affected by addiction

The prevailing issues impacting on educational access and retention highlighted in focus groups conducted with women affected by addiction included the impact of attending methadone clinics during class time and the need for greater clarity on course certification.

Participants spoke of to the vital importance of having their children in their lives, increasing the social capital of them and their children, which in turn improves their communities, as supported by Rose et al. (2003). Additionally, sustained and supportive contact with family impacts on motivation of those in recovery to access services (Naser et al., 2006). The SAOL Project provides childcare facilities for participants which was valued by those in the discussion and identified as enabling lifelong learning participation. In acknowledgement of the intersectional barriers facing women in addiction, the NDRIC (National Drugs Rehabilitation Implementation Committee) model supports this holistic approach in addiction services (Clarke and Eustace, 2016). Participants in this group spoke of the benefits of having different supports in the one service, which plays a role in preparing them for accessing education. As one participant shared,

“I think coming in here, everyone’s at their own pace and you can just let people be and it’s much more practical, you know? And it gives you the confidence to go back to college. So, in itself, it’s educational here anyway. Without it being educational - the word itself - you are learning about yourself.”

Stigma and discrimination were factors impeding education access and retention for this group. For participants who were prescribed methadone, the strict criteria clinics placed on daily collection times was highlighted as a reason for several participants not being able to participate in education. Due to the limitations that methadone clinics place on patients, and their refusal to discuss flexible options with those accessing this treatment, the model has been extensively criticised in grey literature as impeding user’s recovery by ‘parking’ individuals on the opiate substitute, restricting them from fully participating in education or employment (Neale et al., 2014). In addition to these logistical barriers to education, participants spoke of the fear of being stigmatised by potential education providers if it was discovered they were being prescribed methadone. This fear also acted as a barrier for some participants in accessing education. With over 10,000 people in receipt of methadone prescriptions in Ireland, there is a need for

awareness raising to ensure that this does not continue to act as a barrier in lifelong learning participation. This is important as societal stigma and discrimination experienced by those with prison and addiction histories has been linked to fatalism, or the fear that one will fail, and hopelessness, as supported by Durnescu (2019). As one participant shared,

“I’ve lost all faith in the system. It does have a huge psychological impact. Now, I’m two and a half years out. It’s just... it doesn’t leave you. It does have an impact on you when you are trying to access services and education. The more questions you are asked, you know, personal details and that, the more exposed you feel... I just don’t trust the system anymore. I really don’t.”

Additional to trauma informed care training to all staff in drug services providing Adult and Community Education, peer support has also been recommended by the group affected by addiction as a way of alleviating stigma. Those who have encountered stigma and discrimination spoke of the benefit of peer support which included the facilitation of service access, as supported by Wincup (2019). Having positive role models who can empathise through a shared emotional and psychological struggle of issues such as substance misuse, mental health issues, involvement with social services, experiences of gender-based violence and prison was vital for some of the participants. One participant shared the impact of her role in the SAOL Project’s peer facilitation programme;

“It helps us help other people who are in the position we used to be in and they see how far we are after coming through all this and helps them to take their first step. Even if they come in the door and have a cup of tea - it’s nice to have them in to have a cup of tea and make them feel welcome. It inspires them.”

People impacted by imprisonment

Through focus group discussion, people impacted by imprisonment shared their experiences of several interlinking barriers to lifelong learning participation, both in prison and in the community upon release. Participants provided recommendations to address these challenges in areas such as: stigma and discrimination, the Garda Vetting process, social isolation, progression and peer-support systems in prison.

The majority of this group were affected by addiction; a percentage reflected in the general prison population in Ireland which is estimated between 70-80% (Dillion et al., 2020). Despite this, participants highlighted the absence of support in prison for those who want to address the issues that led them to addiction, criminality and subsequent imprisonment. The participants aired their frustration at this but also provided some suggestions as to how prisoner's needs could be better addressed. The Pathways Centre provides both addiction counselling and level 5 addiction studies. Fisher (2017) notes the relationship between psychoeducation provision and therapeutic engagement as having an impact on an individual's chances of recovery. Participants in this group who experienced this combination of psychoeducation and therapy shared the benefits and recommended that addiction studies, in combination with addiction therapy, should be delivered in prisons,

“That addiction studies would work fantastic up there. Like, I was looking forward to it every week, I was flying after each class ‘cause, you know, I really wanted to do it. I could relate to every bit of it and you know, you’re learning as you go. You get little flashbacks like, ‘oh yeah, that reminds me of that time or’, so you know, you really relate to everything and you’re just going, ‘oh my god, that’s what’s been happening’.”

“In there, there’s nothing, especially for the likes who have addiction. I’d say 60 or 70% and they need help as well, rather than just leave you there and as for counselling and that, there’s

no help for anyone in there, literally no help for anyone.”

Participants in this group expressed considerable empathy for their peers from disadvantaged backgrounds who were in prison, many of whom had little opportunity to access education. Participants identified several barriers relating to provision of courses and programmes including a lack of choice in modules, the quality of the existing courses provided, poorly scheduled and under-resourced classes limiting availability, and the lack of accreditation of courses completed in prison. As one participant shared, “The classes that were there, they weren’t going to do anything for our futures, do you know what I mean, to try to better ourselves?” Recovery capital can constitute supportive family dynamics, positive peer influences, and access to beneficial social supports which promote self-determination within the individual. Self-determination is promoted through the maintenance of several core areas which include access to education and training (Munton et. al., 2014). The group offered several practical solutions to improve the experience of prison for their peers and their chances of recovery and reintegration upon release from prison. As one participant shared in the hope of increasing agency and self-determination among their peers,

“I would like more options and I think some of the options here are ridiculous, being honest, as adults, you know? I think students who come should have more of a say in what classes are on. Like, to ask us for ideas in what we might like to do rather than a page up on the wall and none of us are interested in half of it or maybe teachers not available and things like that. We’re the students like. Rather than having to go into a class just for the sake of it when you have absolutely no interest in it like, you know that kind of way, but you feel like you have to be in on it.”

Past traumatic experiences, which were highlighted by a majority of groups, can impact on the brain's cognitive functioning, including the ability to retain information, and while

the symptoms are often invisible, we must recognise that many marginalised adult learners are struggling as a result of trauma (Gross, 2019). In addition, these disadvantaging factors have been found to impair the quality of the educational experience. Migrant women, for example, reported the necessity of “tolerating” poor treatment in Direct Provision centres. Additionally, people affected by imprisonment described a lack of autonomy in relation to their educational choices. Conversely, the benefits of adult learning in terms of psychological wellbeing were expressed by a number of the groups, among them learners who cited the importance of a sense of community, friendship, routine, and personal development as integral to their wellbeing. Thus, despite instances of re-traumatisation and the replication of prejudices within educational spaces, Community Education was characterised as providing a healing space for those who had suffered adverse life experiences among a majority of the groups we consulted.

This reflects the findings in AONTAS’ CEN Census Report (2020), a study of Community Education provision in Ireland which showed the critical importance of Community Education groups in supporting vulnerable and marginalised learner populations. The report found that Community Education in Ireland was particularly important in meeting the needs of women and lone parents, with women being three times more likely than men to participate in Community Education courses, and more likely to report an unmet educational need (2020). The report found that the small-scale nature of Community Education groups, their provision of accredited and non-accredited options, and their high percentage of female participants made Community Education appealing and important to those from marginalised and vulnerable demographics. The White Paper on Adult Learning (2000), identifying key characteristics of the Irish Community Education sector, viewed Community Education as being “dedicated to individual development and collective community advancement, particularly in marginalised communities.”

Conclusion

According to SOLAS (2021), lifelong learning “encompasses learning at all stages of life and includes all types of learning activities.” The pursuit of lifelong learning is considered personally, socially and economically desirable by the European Union (2021). There are a number of reasons why repeated participation in education across a person’s lifespan and at different ages is considered beneficial, both to the individual and to society. In addition to promoting the professional and personal development and enhancing employment prospects, participation in lifelong learning promotes active citizenship and social cohesion (European Education Area, 2021). As such, it is an aim of the New European Agenda for Adult Learning to foster greater participation in learning at different stages throughout life for adults in Europe. As of 2021, Ireland’s lifelong learning participation rate was at 13.1%, short of the EU 2020 lifelong learning target of 15% and the updated EU 2030 target of 60% (SOLAS, 2021). As this research indicates, in order to meet this target, adult learning must adapt to the needs of groups vulnerable and marginalised, such as migrants, older adults, lone parents, people with disabilities, people affected by addiction, and people affected by imprisonment, who are historically excluded from education. The barriers to educational participation and attainment identified in this report provide a pathway for policy interventions which will ease burdens on these groups and facilitate their increased participation in lifelong learning.

The move to remote and digital learning as necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been a factor in the reduction in adult learning participation in recent years (SOLAS, 2021). However, as this research indicates, there are pre-existing social and economic factors which create disadvantage for specific cohorts of people that compound the difficulties in participating in education brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research indicates that educational providers who would like to support the inclusion of people at risk of educational disadvantage must implement outreach efforts which include specific, tailored supports designed to ameliorate economic burdens and to adapt to the emotional and social needs of those from marginalised backgrounds.

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Supplementary Table 1: Learning and Works Institute Survey Respondent Characteristics (n= 1,042)

	% of total (weighted)	% of total (unweighted)
Gender		
Female	50%	50%
Male	50%	49%
Age		
17-19	6%	5%
20-24	11%	10%
25-34	21%	21%
35-44	25%	26%
45-54	21%	21%
55-64	16%	17%
Region		
Connacht/Ulster	18%	16%
Dublin	28%	29%
Munster	27%	28%
Rest of Leinster	27%	27%
Rural/Urban		
Urban city/large town	71%	71%
Rural/village	29%	29%
Social class		
AB	30%	30%
C1	27%	27%
C2	18%	18%
DE	26%	25%

	% of total (weighted)	% of total (unweighted)
Employment status		
Employed	75%	75%
Retired/Unable to work/Disabled	6%	7%
Still at school	3%	3%
In full time higher education	3%	3%
Unemployed and seeking work	6%	6%
Unemployed and not seeking work	6%	6%
Highest education level		
Primary / no formal assessments or exams	1%	1%
Lower secondary education (usually ages 11-15)	5%	4%
Upper secondary education (usually ages 16-19)	19%	19%
Post-secondary education (after secondary school, not including university or equivalent)	22%	22%
University (undergraduate and post-graduate)	49%	49%
PHD/ advanced research qualification	2%	2%
Age completed full-time education		
16 or under	9%	9%
17-18	22%	22%
19-20	15%	14%
21+	46%	47%
Parent		
Yes	34%	34%
No	66%	66%
Unpaid caring responsibilities		
Yes	21%	21%
No	79%	79%

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