



“A couple of teachers played a significant role in instilling a sense of self-confidence in me... that's the main motive of my career anyway”: Motivations and Experiences of Working Class Student Teachers from DCU Local Community Outreach Hubs to Promote Access to the Teaching Profession

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“Many students see DEIS schools as a safe place, and I want to be that safe haven for someone else in the future. I believe DEIS schools are more community-oriented...It's a relaxed and supportive environment, more than just a school—it's a community.”

Niamh

“I want to be a teacher and my main focus as a teacher is to instil self-confidence in all children, as I said, to make them empowered, to feel like there are no obstacles in their way and they can do anything they set their minds to, and that they're just happy in school. They're expressive.”

Niall

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FOREWORD

The teaching profession - once seen as a relatively taken-for-granted component of the Irish education system - has been the focus of new attention in recent years. Teacher supply challenges, especially in areas of high housing costs, have made headlines. Less attention has been paid to the fact that interest in becoming a teacher in Ireland has not waned; some subject areas in post-primary education can be harder to support but it's important to note that graduates in these areas are in high demand and short supply beyond teaching. Lots of people in Ireland want to be teachers; fewer can afford to live in the communities where the schools need them to work.

Supply concerns have been matched by concerns for the profile of the profession in Ireland. In recent years, such concerns have widened beyond gender, to include social class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. As Ireland has changed, the changes in the profile of the teaching profession have lagged behind. The same is true for most professions; the selection of candidates for the professions has traditionally been a conserving and conservative process. But for teaching, the importance of role models for children and young people from within their own communities in supporting engagement and achievement has been well-documented.

This report provides further evidence of the impact of current teachers on future teachers, and of the importance of teachers having the opportunity to work close to their own communities.

The voices of the student teachers who were supported by the DCU Hubs in their journey to teaching provide compelling testimony to the influence of teachers, to the motivation to teach, and to a commitment to be a positive force in the lives of future generations in their own communities and beyond. What is also evident is that without the support provided through the Hubs, their chances of accessing teacher education programmes, and thriving within them, would have been greatly diminished. And those programmes would themselves have been diminished, deprived of the contributions and insights of students from communities more often talked about than given voice. Each October when almost a thousand graduating teachers walk across the stage of the Helix, their CAO scores are long forgotten. But the communities they represent remain important; to them, to those communities; to the profession and the wider education system.

The DCU Hubs open that path to the Helix stage to the communities of north Dublin. North Dublin needs them; the teaching profession needs them; and the students presented in this report shows that they really can transform lives and societies.

Professor Anne Looney

Executive Dean, DCU Institute of Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study explores 17 working class student teachers' motivations and experiences on their paths to becoming a primary/post-primary teacher, their experiences in DCU local community outreach learning hubs, and their transition to DCU's Institute of Education. Since the opening of the first hub in autumn 2017, 47 hubs students have now gained entry to primary teaching in DCU Institute of Education. This contrasts with a baseline of close to zero students from the Darndale, Coolock, Kilbarrack and Finglas areas gaining entry to primary teaching in the previous decade in DCU/St. Patrick's College.

276 students attended the three Darndale-Coolock, Kilbarrack and Finglas hubs in 2022-23. 426 students attended the three Darndale-Coolock, Kilbarrack and Finglas hubs in 2023-24. 472 education sessions were delivered by the hubs in 2022-23. 524 education sessions were delivered by the hubs in 2023-24. The subjects of the sessions were in response to demand by students and included Maths, Irish (as well as oral Irish), English, Biology, French and exam technique. The two hubs coordinators also provided a mentoring and advisory role for the hubs students on various aspects of access to third level, while facilitating various information days, DCU St. Patrick's Campus visits and talks in schools from current B.Ed students who previously attended the hubs.

A range of key findings emerged from these interviews with student teachers from the hubs. These are as follows:

Desire to teach in DEIS schools in future It is particularly noticeable that for 16 out of 17 interviewees, there is a clear desire to teach in DEIS schools, with some already having had the opportunity to do so during their placement.

Early Development for Many Students of Aspiration to Become a Teacher. The aspiration ages show significant variation; nevertheless, the majority of participants expressed their desire to become teachers during their primary school years, between the ages of 5 and 11. At least 11 out of 17 participants first considered the idea of becoming educators during this period.

Building on Positive School Experiences to Foster Aspirations to Become a Teacher. As well as due to family influences, experiences during primary and secondary school play a crucial role in shaping students' aspirations towards teaching.

Multidimensional Positive Impacts of the Hubs. The Hubs provided a range of key academic, social, emotional and practical supports to enable the students gain entry to primary teaching in DCU Institute of Education.

Key challenges remain including the high Leaving Certificate points to gain entry and in particular **Challenges in Meeting the Irish Language Requirements.** 10 out of 17 mentioned the barriers faced by their friends were proficiency in the Irish language. As well as financial obstacles another aspect highlighted is **the Length and complexity of the pathway to primary teaching.**

Two obvious ways to broaden the outreach roles of the Hubs is to **Recognise the Wider Role of the Hubs in Supporting Access to Third Level Education for Other Subjects than Teaching** and for a **Future focus of the Hubs on Primary School Pupils**

The findings of this Report need to be situated against the backdrop of the recruitment and retention crisis of teachers in the Irish system, in recent years, identified by the OECD DEIS Review 2024 as disproportionately impacting on DEIS schools. Almost all of the interviewed hubs students gave a positive commitment regarding their interest in teaching in DEIS schools

in future. This offers a strategic basis for these hubs and future expanded hubs to be a notable element in a wider national strategy for DEIS schools, one focusing both on access to diversify the teaching profession and **one on teacher supply and retention for DEIS schools that recognises that increasing student teachers from DEIS schools can help foster a cohort with demonstrable commitment to working in DEIS schools.** There is a **clear need for continued support and potential expansion of the hubs to other areas of North Dublin through increased HEA funding and resources.** It is recommended that the HEA explore synergies with other third level institutions to establish similar such hubs elsewhere nationally in working class communities.

Given the notable finding that a majority of interviewees first considered the idea of becoming educators already in primary school, there is a need for a **more explicit, systemic and structured focus on consideration of future careers by teachers in classroom discussions at primary school level in DEIS school contexts.**

There is opportunity to expand the goals of the hubs beyond primary teaching and teaching more generally, to include a focus on other distinctive courses in DCU, particularly those where the benefits to society of a diverse student and professional body are evident. The hubs can be envisaged as **an initial step towards the development of local community lifelong learning centres and the HEA may consider its own future strategic role in encouraging third level institutions to establish such local community outreach lifelong learning centres to promote access to targeted courses in third level courses** including but by no means limited to those for primary and secondary teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

This study explores working class student teachers' motivations and experiences on their paths to becoming a primary/post-primary teacher, their experiences in DCU local community outreach learning hubs, in conjunction with Northside Area Partnership and Dublin North West Partnership, funded by the HEA PATH 1 and the student teachers' transitions to DCU Institute of Education.

Today, the benefits of higher education are increasingly recognized as necessary for personal growth and societal progress. However, persistent disparities in access to such opportunities remain a challenge across the world (OECD, 2018; 2023). Marginalised communities continue to face barriers that impede their access to higher education, exacerbating existing inequalities. In response to this challenge, governments and education policymakers are increasingly acknowledging the importance of increasing diversity and promoting equity and inclusion in education (OECD, 2023).

This research explores the impact of DCU Local Community Outreach Learning Hubs and their role in promoting equity of access to the teaching profession within the Institute of Education. By examining the individual narratives of aspiring educators, we aim to shed light their journeys toward DCU the Institute of Education, including their interactions with DCU's community learning hubs, and challenges that individuals encounter in their path to becoming a teacher.

1.2. Research Methods

The methodological framework of the study is based on qualitative research principles, emphasizing an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. This approach allows for an understanding of the aspirations and challenges associated with becoming a primary and post-primary teacher. Fieldwork was carried out between February 2023 and March 2024, during which semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main method of data collection. By employing thematic analysis, the study aims to systematically identify patterns, themes, and insights within the qualitative data obtained from these interviews. This methodological framework enables the researchers to explore narratives and meaningful connections across the three key themes: the early stage of becoming a teacher, participation in the hubs, and career expectations. Further information is provided in the methodology section.

2. EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN IRELAND

2.1 The National Access Plan 2022-2028

Education has the power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty and break down cycles of disadvantage. Education is not an end in itself – it can enable people to reach their full potential, and create value, prosperity, resilience, and a cohesive, sustainable, and vibrant society. An inclusive higher education system is a priority for Ireland’s economic, social, and equality objectives (HEA, 2022).

Equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy, affirming that all individuals should have fair access to education regardless of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances (HEA, 2022). In light of this principle, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (often referred to as the “National Access Office”) was established in 2003 aimed at promoting equal opportunities for access to higher education. Since its establishment, it has implemented policies and programs to widen participation in higher education and address disparities in access for underrepresented groups. The office has developed four Action Plans, including the current 2022-2028 plan, to advance its mission.

The current National Access Plan -A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028 represents a continued commitment to fostering inclusivity within the higher education landscape. According to the Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) analysis, in the academic year 2020/2021, 10% of all new entrants (including full time and part-time) to higher education in Ireland came from socioeconomically marginalised areas compared to 20% from affluent areas¹ (HEA, November 2022).

In terms of fields of study, the breakdown of the socioeconomic profile of all new entrants in 2020/2021 also reveals disparities. Education, along with various other fields of study, exhibits one of the lowest proportions of students categorised as deprived, falling even below the overall average of 10%. Conversely, Services stand out with the highest representation at 13%, indicating a significant portion of deprived students pursuing programs in this sector. Additionally, other notable fields include Health and welfare, and Communication Technologies, each representing 11% of the deprived student population (See Table 1).

One of the ambition outlined in the plan pertains to ensuring that the composition of the higher education student body reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population “at all levels and across all programmes.” (HEA, 2022, p. 28) This ambition underscores the importance of inclusivity throughout the entire higher education system, from undergraduate to postgraduate levels and across various fields of study. It emphasizes that diversity and representation should not be limited to specific programs or levels of education but should permeate every aspect of higher education. However, given the persistent challenges in increasing participation from

¹ The Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) categorise students into four groups: Disadvantaged, marginally below average, marginally above average, and affluent. In this study, we employ the term 'socioeconomically marginalised' to align with the disadvantaged category, those individuals experiencing the greatest levels of marginalisation.

underrepresented groups across all levels and programs, targeted interventions are essential to make tangible progress in achieving equity of access for these groups.

Field of Study	SocioEconomically Marginalised	Affluent
Services	13%	14%
Health and welfare	11%	18%
Information and Communication Technologies	11%	20%
Arts and humanities	10%	19%
Generic programmes and qualifications	10%	26%
Social sciences, journalism, and information	10%	20%
Education	9%	14%
Engineering, manufacturing, and construction	9%	19%
Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics	9%	19%
Business, administration, and law	9%	26%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary	7%	11%
Grant Total	10%	20%

Table 1. Deprivation Index Score for “Disadvantaged” and “Affluent” Categories by Fields of Study. Source: HEA, February 2022

2.2 Overview and Key Milestones for DCU Local Community Outreach Learning Hubs, in Conjunction with Northside Area Partnership and Dublin North West Partnership

DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre’s local community outreach hubs, in conjunction with Northside Area Partnership, were launched in December 2017 in Darndale by the then Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, T.D. These Darndale-Coolock-Kilbarrack hubs, funded by the Higher Education Authority’s (HEA) PATH 1 Initiative, are intended to promote access to the teaching profession and specifically to primary education in DCU’s Institute of Education. Due to the success of the initial two hubs, a third hub was opened in Finglas, in 2021, in conjunction with Dublin North West Partnership and launched by DCU President Professor Daire Keogh and Dean of DCU Institute of Education, Professor Anne Looney in June 2022.

Throughout the operation of the Local Community Outreach Learning Hubs, a key focus has been on providing holistic academic and social support services to the students. Detailed information about the range of support services offered by the Community Learning Hubs can be found in Table 2.

In the hubs, the students receive academic assistance, including educational classes, exam preparation, Irish language support, guidance on career pathways, and financial advice and support. The hubs have expanded and built partnerships with educational institutions, community organizations, and local businesses to enhance educational opportunities for local students. The hubs actively engage with the community through initiatives such as social media campaigns, radio interviews, and community outreach efforts, aimed at raising awareness about educational opportunities and encouraging participation in the learning activities and resources offered by the hubs. The hub coordinator collaborates with educational institutions, including

DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Post-Primary Schools, to identify and support students interested in teaching careers.

There has been a notable expansion of support services provided by the Community Learning Hubs over the years (Board Report Northside Partnership, 2019-2023). Initially, the hubs primarily served students aged 15 and older, typically from fourth to sixth year. However, in 2023, funding enabled the launch of a junior cycle outreach program aimed at engaging with local schools to support and encourage 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th-year students to consider teaching as a career from a younger age.

Support Services	Description
Academic support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering a variety of classes covering subjects such as Irish, English, Maths, French and others. • Offering to different educational levels, from Junior Cycle, Senior Cycle to Leaving Certificate and beyond. • Providing structured lessons and activities to support learning objectives. • Implementing both in-person and online learning formats. • Conducting mock exams and practice interviews to help students prepare for academic assessments and job interviews. • Offering revision courses, study groups, and exam preparation workshops. • Providing guidance on exam strategies, time management techniques, and effective study habits. • Offering classes specifically focused on the Irish language, offering to students of various proficiency levels, from beginners to advanced learners. • Providing structured lessons and activities aimed at improving Irish language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. • Offering additional resources such as textbooks, workbooks, and online materials to support Irish language learning outside of class. • Conducting mock oral Irish exams to help students prepare for oral assessments, interviews, or other language proficiency tests. • Promoting Irish language immersion experiences, such as Gaeltacht trips or cultural events, to enhance language proficiency and cultural appreciation. • Organizing special events and activities during Seachtain na Gaeilge – Irish Language Week, such as themed workshops, cultural performances, or language immersion days, to celebrate and promote the Irish language and culture within the community learning hubs. These events may include traditional music sessions, storytelling sessions, Irish dance workshops, Gaelic games, and opportunities for students to use and practice their Irish language skills in real-life contexts.
Career Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting information sessions and talks on career pathways, with a particular focus on teaching as a primary career option. Guest speakers, including former students or professionals in the field, may be invited to share their insights and experiences, providing valuable guidance and inspiration to students.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering guidance on alternative college courses and educational opportunities. • Assisting students in exploring various career options based on their interests, skills, and academic backgrounds.
Financial Advice and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing advice and guidance on accessing financial support for education, including HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) and DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) schemes, as well as SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) grants. • Assisting students in their application processes for various forms of financial support, ensuring they understand the requirements and deadlines. • Conducting financial planning workshops to help students manage their finances throughout their college journey. These workshops cover topics such as budgeting, managing student loans, understanding financial aid packages, and exploring part-time job opportunities while studying. • Managing the Northside Partnership Fund, providing financial assistance to students who require support for expenses related to their education, such as travel expenses to college or the cost of necessary resources like laptops.
Mentoring Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing personalized support to students based on their individual needs, circumstances, and academic goals. • Offering one-on-one guidance and mentoring to students, especially mature students, parents, and those facing unique challenges. • Addressing specific concerns and obstacles faced by students, such as language barriers, learning disabilities, or socio-economic marginalisation.
Social Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arranging visits to local universities such as DCU to familiarize students with campus life, facilities, and academic programs. • Organizing taster lectures or workshops at universities to give students a preview of college-level courses and teaching styles. • Providing opportunities for students to interact with faculty, students, and staff at universities and gain first-hand insight into higher education pathways. • Inspiring students to pursue higher education by exposing them to the academic environment and resources available at universities.

Table 2. Support Services offered by the Hubs. Source: Board Report Northside Partnership, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023.

2.2.1. Key Milestones for the Hubs

Since the opening of the first hub in autumn 2017, 47 hubs students have now gained entry to primary teaching in DCU Institute of Education. This contrasts with a baseline of close to zero students from the Darndale, Coolock, Kilbarrack and Finglas areas gaining entry to primary teaching in the previous decade in DCU/St. Patrick's College.

It is to be emphasised that many other hubs students have gained entry to DCU Arts courses with a view to pursuing secondary teaching in future or engaging in the PME conversion course

to primary teaching. A notable number have also gained entry to DCU's Early Childhood Education course.

The hubs operate an inclusive policy so that all students from the local areas are welcome to attend sessions, and not only those aspiring to become a teacher. This is to sustain a cohort effect of motivation to attend third level in future for students from the local target areas.

- 276 students attended the three Darndale-Coolock, Kilbarrack and Finglas hubs in 2022-23.
- 426 students attended the three Darndale-Coolock, Kilbarrack and Finglas hubs in 2023-24.
- 472 education sessions were delivered by the hubs in 2022-23
- 524 education sessions were delivered by the hubs in 2023-24.

The subjects of the sessions were in response to demand by students and included Maths, Irish (as well as oral Irish), English, Biology, French and exam technique.

The two hubs coordinators also provided a mentoring and advisory role for the hubs students on various aspects of access to third level, while facilitating various information days, DCU St. Patrick's Campus visits and talks in schools from current B.Ed students who previously attended the hubs.

A further new hub in Finglas South has also been established in 2024 by Dublin North West Partnership and DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre.

DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre established the Darndale-Coolock-Kilbarrack Taskforce in 2017 composed of local community stakeholders and schools to advise on the development of the hubs, now expanded to be the Darndale-Coolock-Kilbarrack-Finglas Taskforce. Meetings of this Taskforce are hosted on a rotational basis in both Northside Area Partnership and Dublin North West Partnership.

The hubs coordinators engage in a focused way with over 12 local DEIS secondary schools in the Darndale-Coolock-Kilbarrack-Finglas areas. While the initial focus of the hubs was on 5th and 6th year students to support them with the Leaving Certificate exam, supports from the hubs are now also available for local early secondary students. Mature students have also been a target group for support from the very start of the hubs.

In addition to supporting students interested in teaching degree programs, the Community Learning Hubs also provide support for students pursuing various other degree programs (Board Report Northside Partnership, 2019-2023). Some of the degree programs supported by the hubs include: Bachelor of Arts, Journalism, Business, Science and Technology, Healthcare, Humanities and Social Sciences, Sport Sciences and Language Education.

Some of the degrees supported by the Community Outreach Learning Hubs serve as stepping stones in the pursuit of a Master in Education (Primary Teaching) or Postgraduate Master in Education (PME). These degrees provide students with foundational knowledge and skills in their chosen field, preparing them for advanced studies and careers in education. For example, a Bachelor of Arts degree may serve as a precursor to a Masters in Education, allowing students to specialize in a particular area of education such as curriculum development, educational leadership, or special education. Similarly, degrees in subjects like humanities, social sciences, or language education can provide a strong academic background for individuals aspiring to become educators in those specific fields.

2.2.2. Goals of the Hubs

The stated goals of the hubs from the outset are as follows:

- To promote a culture of confidence and high expectations about pursuing a career in teaching
- To provide key information to potential applicants from the local area to the teaching profession
- To upskill young people in the local area to enable them to apply to enter DCU Institute of Education
- To increase mature students applications from local people from the Darndale-Coolock-Kilbarrack-Finglas community to primary and post-primary teacher education in DCU
- To build on key strengths in the local area
- To develop synergistic social processes across the local areas so that aspiring to become a teacher becomes a realistic expectation for many in the community
- To establish a range of social support networks among peers and in dialogue with local services to foster a culture of aspiring to enter the teaching profession
- To establish hubs for interagency working to promote access to DCU Institute of Education in the targeted areas
- Increasing motivation, confidence and awareness of opportunities to pursue teaching profession in DCU Institute of Education for youth aged 16-24 and parents of schoolgoing children as well as mature students
- Heightened aspirations educationally and less fear of failure or fear success in the targeted areas

2.3 Specific Relevance of DCU Local Community Outreach Hubs for The National Access Plan 2022-2028

The goals of the hubs are firmly embedded in the strategic objectives of the successive Higher Education Authority’s (HEA) National Access Plans for Higher Education (2015-19) and 2022-28.

The HEA National Action Plan 2022-28 recognises the central importance of diversity of access to the teaching profession, stating explicitly its commitment ‘Focusing on diversity in the teaching profession, recognising the significant influence teachers have as role models for building a sense of belonging in education and supporting student ambitions.’ p.30.

The Hubs seek to give tangible expression to two overall goals, Inclusivity, Coherence, and two specific objectives in the current National Access Plan. These pertain to Objectives 1.7, and 4.1, see Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusivity and Coherence: HEA National Access Plan

Goal 1: Inclusivity	1.7 Objective To work towards a more diverse teacher workforce by supporting equity of access, participation and success in	Action To consider the impact of PATH 1 projects on students from priority groups and their ability to access ITE,
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	initial teacher education by priority groups.	including meeting entry requirements and overcoming barriers to access. To build on learnings from PATH 1, with increased focus on early intervention
Goal 4: Coherence	4.1 To develop strategic partnerships and approaches to support access, participation and success by students from priority groups.	Action To build on and improve partnerships and collaborative pathways between the FET and HE sectors, community education providers, community partners and employers as part of future development of PATH.

The Hubs seeks to give expression, in particular, to these two key performance indicators in the current National Access Plan, see Table 2.

Table 2. Key Performance Indicators: HEA National Access Plan

Key Performance Indicator (4) Student diversity across fields of study	Socioeconomic profile of new entrants to initial teacher education courses	Baseline Data In 2019/2020, 8.7% of new entrants to secondary teacher education courses were disadvantaged compared to 6.1% of those pursuing primary teaching (overall, 10.8% of new entrants are disadvantaged). Measurement over the period 2022–2028 Socioeconomic profile of new entrants to teacher education courses using DIS data Socioeconomic profile of new entrants to selected fields of study Summary of the % of new entrants who are from disadvantaged areas across selected fields of study: • Economics 2.3% • Medicine 5.2% • Financing, Banking & Insurance 9.6% • Law 10.9% • Nursing and Midwifery 13.0% • Social Work and Counselling 19.4% • Childcare and Youth Services 21.9%
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Key Performance Indicator (6) Entry to higher education for students attending DEIS schools	Proportion of new entrants from DEIS schools entering HE	Baseline Data SRS data shows that in 2020/2021, 12% of new entrants came from DEIS schools. This compares to 10% in 2019/2020
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This Report and the Hubs are further situated against the backdrop of the following Strategic Goals and Objectives of the National Access Plan, see Table 3.

Table 3. Evidence-Driven Approach, Sustainability, Inclusivity: HEA National Access Plan

Goal 6: Evidence-driven approach	6.2 To evaluate and monitor the impact of access and inclusion initiatives.	To carry out an impact assessment of PATH 1, 2 and 3.
	6.2 To evaluate and monitor the impact of access and inclusion initiatives.	To ensure updates to the Higher Education System Performance Framework reflect the learning from implementation of this Plan.
Goal 5: Sustainability	5.2 To sustain funding and develop initiatives and activities that involve HE and community partnerships, funded through time-limited programmes	To explore how the higher education sector can engage better with partners such as DEIS schools, further education providers, community and voluntary groups, existing local initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage, and Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs).
Goal 1: Inclusivity	1.4 To incorporate the voice of priority group students in decision-making on access, participation and student success policies, programmes and initiatives.	To improve mechanisms for students to meaningfully contribute to access policy
	1.6 To consider how to achieve a more diverse student population across all programmes and all levels of study, both undergraduate and postgraduate.	To consult with stakeholders on ways to promote diversity and inclusion in the professions and in high points or high demand courses and at postgraduate (taught and research) level.

2.4 Research Informed Strategic Dimensions for the Hubs as Local Community Assertive Outreach Spaces to Promote Access

Many studies on motivations to becoming a teacher from an access and diversity lens tend to focus on gender aspects (e.g., Pollitt & Oldfield 2016; Dos Santos 2020; See et al. 2022) to increase numbers of male teachers, and on ethnicity aspects (Naughton 2020). Social class dimensions to motivation for accessing the teaching profession tends to be under researched.

While some studies have identified family influences on becoming a teacher, such as a recent Irish study where family members were also teachers (Geoghan 2023), a further developmental focus is needed on *when* students may decide or lean towards becoming a teacher, possibly due to their own experiences of school. It has been observed that working class students in an Irish context typically do not have family role models already in the teaching profession to influence their career choice, so that the family system influence identified on becoming a teacher in Geoghan (2023) is frequently not available in the same way for working class students aspiring to become teachers. An Irish sample of postprimary student teachers from working class backgrounds reported low expectations from teachers related to their future capabilities in terms of careers such as teaching and being actively discouraged from teaching by career guidance teachers (Keane, Heinz & Lynch 2018, pp.76-77). Dublin students were highlighted as being underrepresented in primary initial teacher education entrants in Ireland in 2018 (Heinz & Keane 2018).

Previous research on psychology of motivation for students experiencing poverty has highlighted both fear of failure (Jimerson 1999), where students stop trying for fear they will not be able to succeed, and also fear of success, where working class students' fear that educational success will distance them from the families and peers (Ivers & Downes 2012).

A key contribution of a community based outreach learning centre is what is described as 'working class empathy' (Wilkins & Burke 2015, p.444), where inclusivity means encouragement of the survival of potential students' attachment to a working class identity rather than experiencing a middleclass cultural colonizing process. This local community process helps address the cultural barrier of disjuncture (Jarvis 2007, 2008; Wilkins & Burke 2015), a cultural sense of alienation and anomie in a university environment for many from working class backgrounds. Jarvis (2007) envisages disjuncture as a continuum (p. 139), where at the extreme it leads to alienation and anomie in the learner. It helps potential students feel comfortable in retaining, for example, their accents and dialects, while engaging with other social groups (see also Wilkins & Burke 2015).

Hoelscher et al. (2008) found that the most common reason given by students in England for choosing an institution (university or further education college) was its location. This was mentioned as a single reason for choice by one third of students regardless of the educational pathway chosen. Good location was defined as proximity with home or with family, proximity with a big city or well served by transport. It would appear that a departmental and faculty level focus on access to education promotion is radically underdeveloped across many European countries (Downes 2014) (see also Croxford and Raffe 2013 for a focus on differentiated access across faculties within the same institution in a UK context).

The hubs are concretisations of a range of key ideas developed in DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's publications. They involve a commitment to assertive outreach principles focusing not simply on what is being communicated, on simply information but on the how, who and where questions, how promotion of access to teaching is being developed, by whom and in locations where local students feel they belong (Downes 2014).

Relationship building and peer supports are a key feature of the Centre's evaluation of UCD's *Future You* project (McNally & Downes 2016), with a focus also on developing so-called hot knowledge, namely, informal local contextual knowledge about courses, beyond simply official information. The key strength of 'hot knowledge' (Whitty et al. 2015) from peers, i.e., new, context-specific meaningful and unofficial knowledge, shared across social networks to develop strong community links helps students to both 'know the ropes' (cultural capital) and develop social capital 'who you know' (Whitty et al. 2015). The hubs provide not only academic supports but are also social spaces for mutual peer support as part of the need for a cohort effect, a system change in aspirations across cohorts of students rather than simply focusing on individuals. This peer relational support aspect has been emphasised in our Centre's publications (e.g., McNally et al. 2022).

The focus on community spaces of trust is part of a general 'spatial turn' in education (Ferrare & Apple 2010) including the proposed concentric spatial turn for education (Downes, Li, Van Praag & Lamb 2024), to provide welcoming spaces of assumed connection and openness where working class students do not feel threatened and can express their identity. These are a challenge to diametric spatial systems of hierarchical above/below opposition and more distant, oppositional relations. These also build on the call for a strategic approach to community lifelong learning centres across Europe (Downes 2014). The importance of accessing specific courses in universities has been highlighted in the Educational Disadvantage Centre's 12 country European study on access to higher education (Downes 2014).

DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre is also expressly committed to community development values, building on the work of Freire (1972). Improving access to the teaching profession for working class students is part of a vision not only of developing role models in future for pupils from local Darndale, Coolock, Kilbarrack and Finglas areas in future, but also in recognising, with Freire, that those who have grown up in the local communities are best attuned to understanding the needs of their own communities.

Building on these principles and insights, the Educational Disadvantage Centre at DCU implemented targeted interventions: the DCU Community Outreach Learning hubs, in conjunction with Northside Area Partnership and Dublin North West Partnership. These interventions were designed to widen participation and promote equity of access to the teaching profession. By doing so, the Centre aimed to break down barriers, create equal opportunities, and ensure that aspiring educators from all backgrounds have the support they need to pursue and succeed in their educational and career goals.

3 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted a qualitative research design to capture the experiences of individuals aspiring to become teachers. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate for exploring the participants' journey to becoming a teacher and examining their attitudes, challenges, and the impact of community learning hubs.

3.1 Participants and Sampling Procedure

A total of 17 participants took part in the study. Table 1 outlines the profile of each participant based on gender, current course enrolment, and the hub they attended. Please note that pseudonyms have been used in place of real names.

Pseudonym	Gender	Course	Hub
Aoife	F	BE.d. Primary Teaching	Finglas
Niall	M	BE.d. Primary Teaching	Kilbarrack
Niamh	F	Bachelor of Arts (BAJH)	Kilbarrack
Liam	M	PME in Primary Teaching	Kilbarrack
Siobhán	F	PME in Primary Teaching	Kilbarrack
Caitríona	F	PME in Primary Teaching	Darndale- Coolock
Orla	F	Bachelor of Arts (BAJH)	Darndale- Coolock
Maeve	F	PME in Primary Teaching	Kilbarrack
Eilis	F	BE.d. Primary Teaching	Kilbarrack
Aisling	F	PME Primary Teaching	Kilbarrack
Roisin	F	BE.d. Primary Teaching	Darndale- Coolock
Sinead	F	BE.d. Primary Teaching	Kilbarrack
Clarke	M	PME Post-Primary Education	Darndale-Coolock
Áine	F	BE.d. Primary Teaching	Darndale-Coolock
Sorcha	F	PME Primary Teaching	Darndale-Coolock
Ciara	F	BE.d. Primary Teaching	Finglas
Deirdre	F	BE.d. Primary Teaching	Finglas

Table 3. Participants' profile according to gender, course, and hub.

The majority of participants in this study are women (See Figure 1). The age range of participants spans from 18 to 26 years, with two mature students in their 30s and 40s. Most participants come from low socio-economic backgrounds or reside in Finglas, Darndale, Coolock, Kilbarrack or neighbourhoods near to the hubs.

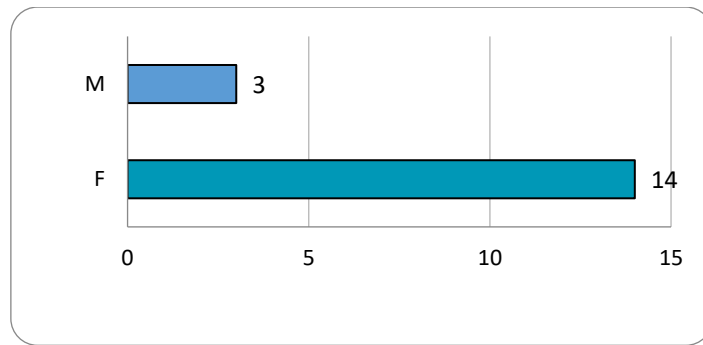


Figure 1. Number of Participants by Gender

The majority of participants are currently enrolled in either the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in Primary Teaching or PME in Post-primary Education, or the Postgraduate Professional Master of Education (PME) in Primary Teaching. Additionally, two participants are studying a Bachelor of Arts (BAJH), with the intention of transitioning to the PME. One participant plans to apply for the PME in primary teaching, while the other aims to apply for the PME in post-primary teaching (See Figure 2).

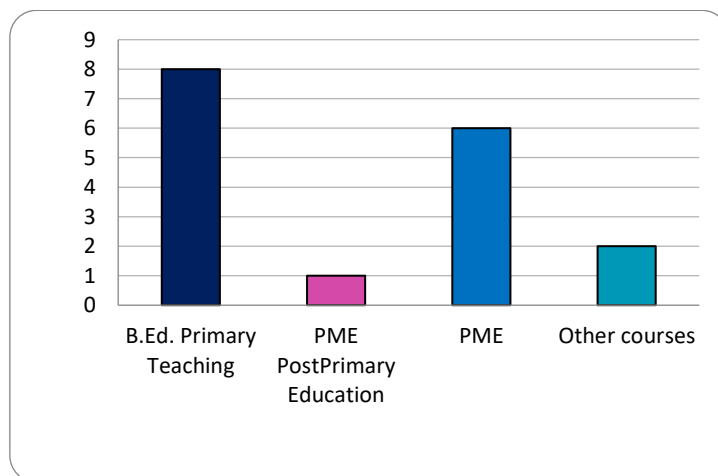


Figure 2. Number of Participants by Course

All participants were engaged with one of the DCU community learning HUBS: Finglas, Darndale-Coolock, or Kilbarrack. Among the participants, three attended to the Finglas hub, eight to the Kilbarrack hub, and six to the Darndale-Coolock hub (refer to Figure 3).

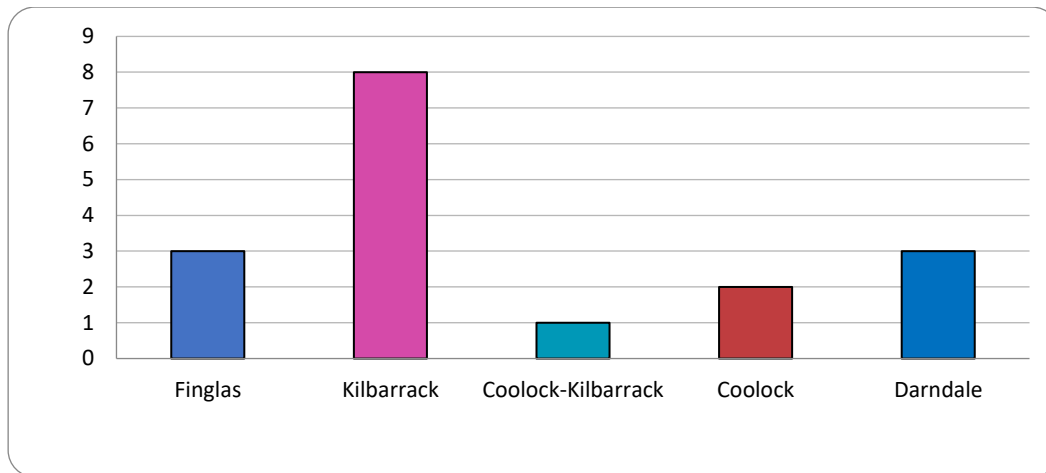


Figure 3. Number of Participants by Hub

A combination of criterion sampling and availability sampling was employed. Criterion sampling involved selecting participants based on pre-established criteria, while availability sampling involved selecting readily available participants. Based on the predetermined criteria, seventeen participants were recruited between February 2023 and March 2024.

This research obtained approval from the DCU Research Ethics Committee. Following ethical approval, Hub coordinators were engaged to facilitate participant recruitment. These coordinators contacted potential participants, and upon obtaining prior consent from them, the researcher reached out via email or phone to provide further details about the research and schedule an interview at their convenience. While approximately 26 participants were contacted, only seventeen underwent interviews. Three participants did not respond to calls or emails, despite attempts on several occasions. Additionally, three declined participation for various reasons: one due to the loss of a friend, another unwilling to be recorded, and the third mentioning a busy schedule. Furthermore, three participants did not meet one of the criteria.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted, with 10 in-person interviews and 7 conducted via Zoom. The interviews focused on three key themes: a) the early stage of becoming a teacher, b) participation in the hubs, and c) career and expectations. The interview questions are included in the Appendix.

Interviews were carried out face-to-face on the DCU St Patrick's campus or via Zoom. Participants received the Plain Language Statement, Consent Form, and Interview questions before interview, usually a week in advance. The consent forms were signed and returned before the interview. Interviews lasted between 40 to 60 minutes and were recorded with a digital voice recorder/USB Dictaphone with password protection.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, themes, and insights across the interviews. The three key themes of the individual's journey guided the analysis process. The analysis involved coding, categorising, and interpreting the qualitative data.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations, participant confidentiality, and robust data management procedures were integral components of the research design.

Steps were taken to minimise potential emotional distress during interviews, including providing sufficient information before starting, ensuring that the participant understands the purpose of the study, a safe environment—usually a private room in DCU St. Patrick, and offering an opportunity to contact the researchers for further information if needed. Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms, and the key connecting real names and pseudonyms were stored separately.

Data was stored securely in both electronic and hard copy formats. Electronic data, including recordings and transcriptions, was stored on DCU Google Drive, with access restricted to the PI and researcher. Data was encrypted, password-protected, and backed up regularly.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings outlined here are categorised into three sections: a) the early stages of becoming a teacher, b) participation in the hubs, and c) career and expectations.

4.1 The Early Stages of Becoming a Teacher

The journey towards becoming a primary or post-primary school teacher is a process that begins long before students set foot on the campus of Dublin City University's Institute of Education. Traditionally, participants followed a specific pathway, starting with completing secondary education, typically concluding in the Leaving Certificate examination—the final assessment in the Irish secondary school system. To pursue a career in primary education, students needed to achieve a specific number of points based on their Leaving Certificate results. Some participants opted to enhance their academic qualifications by completing a Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) course, which could improve their overall points score for admission to primary education degree programs.

Occasionally, students delayed their entrance into primary teaching, either to explore alternative opportunities or because they did not initially meet the requirements, prompting them to seek alternative pathways into primary teaching or post-primary education.

Furthermore, mature students often took non-traditional routes to higher education, initially entering the workforce before returning to formal education.

To understand the journey of participants, it is essential to consider their former influences and motivations, educational contexts, supports systems and barriers in which they navigated their early stages.

4.1.1 Former Influences Shaping Career Decisions

The decision to become a primary or post-primary teacher is influenced by a combination of factors, including family, educational, and societal influences, all of which contribute to shaping participants' aspirations and career choices.

For many students, the initial decision to pursue a career in teaching is influenced by their family's experiences and expectations. About 5 participants grew up in households where parents, relatives or closed family friends are teachers or working in education. These influences often serve as role models, inspiring students to follow in their footsteps.

When I first started thinking about it, when I was in primary school, I liked the idea of it and stuff. And yes, when I was in secondary school, I really liked the idea that you could teach all of them, you know? Two of my aunts are secondary teachers. My sisters are becoming secondary teachers now. And like I have always been around teachers and stuff. (Aoife)

My mother is actually an early childhood playschool teacher. Oh, good. So, growing up, I always finished school before her. She would bring me into the creche or the playschool every summer to play with the kids and assist her and the other teachers. I really liked working with children, but I wanted

them to be just a little bit older, I guess, not early childhood, more like primary age. I really like working with children that age. My mom was the main influence. She definitely was a big part in influencing me. It wasn't necessarily that she was pushing me to do it, but more like just watching her work made me want to do something similar. (Ciara)

Experiences during primary and secondary school also play a crucial role in shaping students' aspirations towards teaching. At least 8 out of 17 students mentioned that positive interactions with teachers, engaging classroom environments, and meaningful learning experiences influenced them to consider teaching as a career path.

I believe it was during my childhood, up until around the age of eight, that I was quite shy. I didn't speak much in class. However, a couple of teachers played a significant role in instilling a sense of self-confidence in me... that's the main motive of my career anyway. (Niall)

I probably decided at a very young age, maybe around 10 or 11. I always said, "I know I want to be a teacher." Then as I got through my years of school, I had a such positive experience. Even though my school was an underprivileged school and there wasn't lot of women in the school, and the school was small, still it had a good influence on me. Contrary to what many assume, there weren't any teachers in my family. It was simply the positive experience I had in school that made me want to be a teacher (Deirdre)

I decided I wanted to be a teacher when I was about eight years old. I was really young. I just loved socializing with people and enjoyed learning. So I really loved school and I loved my friends in school, but I never had a bad teacher. I think that's what made me love it even more because all my teachers were so helpful, and I didn't want to do anything else. That's all I wanted to do was be a teacher. (Maeve)

Beyond familial and educational influences, societal factors, such as perceptions of work-life balance, also play a significant role in shaping participants' views of teaching as a career. For instance, one participant emphasized the appeal of the teaching profession due to the lifestyle it affords.

A lot of my mom's friends are also teachers, so I've kind of seen their lifestyle. It's important to me to have that kind of time, you know? Like being able to go on holidays after the summer, or having Christmas, Easter, and Halloween to spend with family. I also have a son, so knowing that I'll have time off to be with him in the evenings is really important. I just think the work-life balance is nice for a teacher. (Niamh)

4.1.2 Age of Teaching Aspirations and Career Decisions

The age patterns observed in the teaching aspirations and career decisions of the participants demonstrate a varied range of experiences and timelines (See Figure 4). Aspiration age refers to the age when individuals initially aspired to become teachers, while decision age indicates the age at which they committed to actively pursuing a teaching career.

The aspiration ages show significant variation; nevertheless, the majority of participants expressed their desire to become teachers during their primary school years, between the ages of 5 and 11. At least 11 out of 17 participants first considered the idea of becoming educators during this period. However, for some, the inclination toward teaching emerged later during their secondary school years, around the ages of 14 or 15, or later, with aspirations appearing in their twenties or thirties.

When it comes to making a firm decision to become a teacher, the majority—13 out of 17 students—made their decisions during their secondary school years, between the ages of 12 and 17. For many, this decision-making process was encouraged by discussions in school about career choices. However, a minority—four out of 17 individuals—clarified their career decisions in their early twenties or thirties.

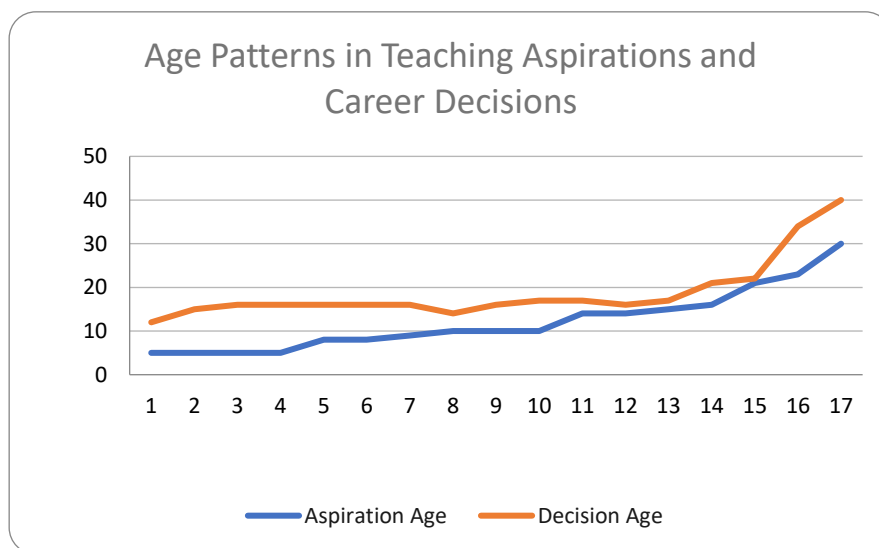


Figure 4. Age Patterns in Teaching Aspirations and Career Decisions of Participants.

4.1.3 Motivations and Influences on the Path to Becoming a Teacher

The main motivations for becoming a teacher vary among participants, but they often revolve around a desire to positively impact children's lives. At least 6 out of 17 participants explicitly mentioned enjoying working with children and young people and observing their learning and growth.

I enjoy working with young people or kids. It's good fun. They come out with all sorts of different things, and I enjoy watching them pick up new things or learn new things, and I learn new things too. So, every day I learn new things and new skills in different topics. (Liam)

I love working with kids. I get along great with little kids and it's fun watching them grow and learn new things and the excitement that they have when they learn something new. (Caitríona)

I just love watching people learn new things. They're all happy and joyous. I like helping someone to achieve something, their goals. (Áine)

About 4 students mentioned negative experiences in their own schooling and aim to create a more positive environment. They want to be the kind of teacher who inspired them and made them look forward to going to school.

My experience in primary school wasn't always the best, especially with some teachers. That's why I wanted to kind of change that for other people. (Aoife)

When I was in primary school, my teachers made all the difference in the world. You often hear people saying they didn't enjoy school and didn't want to go every day. But the teachers I had made me look forward to going every day. So, that made me want to be a teacher and be like that for students in the future. (Sorcha)

One of the main reasons I wanted to be a teacher is because I like to help people. And like, I think I can bring certain skills to the table. I also have some good strategies for people who might find school difficult because school isn't easy for some people. (Clarke)

Another 3 participants emphasised the importance of fostering children's self-confidence, happiness, and well-being. They aim to create a safe and supportive environment.

I think the wellbeing of children is a prerequisite to education. I believe children need to be happy, self-confident individuals in order to progress well academically and become lifelong learners. So, I think the main reason I want to be a teacher and my main focus as a teacher is to instil self-confidence in all children, as I said, to make them empowered, to feel like there are no obstacles in their way and they can do anything they set their minds to, and that they're just happy in school. They're expressive. They feel like they can be themselves without being judged, and they feel safe in the classroom. I always aim to create a secure environment where they're not afraid to make mistakes, they're not afraid to speak out and express their opinions. And as I said, I think that's probably the most important aspect of a teacher even before academic achievement. I think it's just important that the children are happy because I know in a lot of cases children don't have a secure home environment to go to and they might feel quite nervous at home. There might be a lot of arguments and things like that. And I just want to make sure that the classroom is always a place where they feel safe and that they look forward to coming to each day. (Niall)

I think it's important to have a positive impact on kids and ensure that they can have the same positive experiences in school that I had. I believe many people dislike school. So, my main motivation is to ensure that children enjoy school and have someone to look up to. Growing up where I did, I noticed that many kids didn't have someone in their lives, and their teacher was often the only adult they could rely on. (Deirdre)

Finally, four students mentioned feeling motivated to become teachers due to the school environment and the variety of social interactions, experiences, and benefits it offers.

I've always kind of liked the school environment. I know that I'd like to do something in a school, but I've just loved the school environment and I feel like I love how every person is so different. Like, I couldn't see myself doing

a job where it was just me all day by myself. I kind of would be social enough. So I prefer to be surrounded by different people and I like how it changes throughout the day. Like how not every day is the same, every day is different, that's why I wanted to be one. (Roisin)

And some of the benefits that come with it as well. Like, you know, even when I've been on maternity leave from work, I was still paid by the government. It's like having that security, you know? Even if it's just the bare minimum, or if I were to get sick or something unexpected happened, I feel like a salary job offers a lot more stability than other options. So that's another reason. But I guess that's just a part of it, you know? Yeah, I simply enjoy the school environment, and I don't really see myself fitting in with office or other types of professions. I just feel comfortable there. I love the structure and routines of schools. I just like being in a school environment. (Niamh)

4.1.4 Barriers and Obstacles in the Teaching Career

In the quest to become a primary or post-primary teacher, participants faced different challenges in their teaching career paths. As they embarked on this journey, they find themselves confronted by different of obstacles and barriers. (Refer to Table 2 for a summary of the identified barriers).

Barrier	Description
Leaving Certificate Points	Difficulty in achieving the necessary points for entry into teacher education programs.
Proficiency in Irish Language	Challenges in meeting the fluency requirements for Irish, a crucial aspect for primary school teaching.
Socioeconomic Factors	Financial constraints affecting access to resources and affordability of education.
Length and Complexity of Pathway	The length and complexity of the process of attaining necessary qualifications, including PLC, bachelor's, and master's degrees.
Lack of Guidance and Support	Insufficient career counselling and mentorship, and no information about the educational paths.
Psychological barriers	Self-doubt, fear of academic challenges, and a lack of confidence in one's abilities.
Socio-cultural barriers	Societal perceptions regarding college attendance and the intergenerational cycles of educational attainment may influence individuals' decision-making processes and their access to higher education.

Table 4. Barriers the Journey Towards Becoming a Teacher

A. The barrier of academic requirements.

For many, the journey began with academic requirements, specifically the task of meeting the demanding criteria set forth by the education system. Students recounted experiences of

struggling with the target of Leaving Certificate points and demonstrating fluency in the Irish language.

At least ten out of 17 students emphasised the challenges associated with attaining the required academic points for entry into their preferred teacher education program.

So, the first obstacle, the main one, was that I didn't get enough points to gain entry into the Bachelor of Education program. At the time, this was really disappointing. Initially, I felt there wasn't much opportunity for me to pursue primary school teaching. However, with the guidance and support of my school, who introduced me to the Community Learning Hub, I was able to find the direction I needed. They helped me guidance and direction I needed towards the Professional Master of Education program, they helped me to figure out what I needed to do in order to qualify for the course. The hubs helped me in preparation for interviews, an Irish oral exam, determining the necessary Leaving Certificate points, college grades, and other criteria. So, yeah, my main obstacle was gaining admission to the Bachelor of Education program and subsequently finding an alternative path towards becoming a primary school teacher. (Niall)

Well, it was just overcoming getting the honours Irish Leaving Certificate. (Siobhán)

I'd say the points system is a major obstacle. You're competing against a lot of students, especially with many DEIS schools around where I live. You're competing with the whole country, and that's probably the biggest disadvantage. (Orla)

So the points had gone higher, and I was afraid I wasn't going to get the points. But I think the Irish level as well, you need certain points in Leaving Cert, and I was afraid I wasn't going to get that, but I did in the end. Yeah, I think that was kind of the only obstacle (Maeve)

I think the Leaving Certificate points were obviously a big obstacle. Having to get them and the requirements, obviously I had to put in a lot of studying, and that was probably the only obstacle I had. (Eilis)

For me, the obstacles were the points for the leaving certificate. I didn't gain the points to go directly into primary school teaching. I only gained enough points to go into Bachelor of Early Childhood Education. So that was my main obstacle. (Aisling)

Definitely, the points were a big thing. In sixth year, I really struggled with that side of things. I found it really hard, like all of the learning, the study, and like I saw friends going out and having fun in fourth and fifth year, I was just, my head was in the books, and even after that, it was still a struggle. (Sinead)

One of the obstacles I faced was trying to get the right points. Another obstacle was deciding between either history or English because they're 2 separate applications with different amounts of points. Probably the points have gone up a good bit since the Leaving Certificate came out earlier this year. (Clarke)

Five participants highlighted the difficulties faced concerning the Irish language requirement for becoming primary school teachers. Some expressed struggles with Irish and a lack of support in schools.

Just with the requirement of Irish, it's very hard to kind of keep off with it, like studying and with school, in secondary school, it's not really like pushed upon you to kind of just like teach it to just pass the exam and it's not really anything for (Aoife)

I'd say the biggest barrier for people is the level of Irish that is required to be a primary teacher. I think that's a significant barrier for many. I'd say there would be more older people who would go back into teaching except for the level of Irish required. (Siobhán)

The Irish, it was so hard, and I still didn't get it. So now I'm doing a diploma to try to make up for the Irish not being in. But it's just the Irish really held me back the most. Oh my God. Yes, Irish is quite difficult. All the different rules and, oh, nightmare. (Caitríona)

So the points had gone higher, and I was afraid I wasn't going to get the points. But I think the Irish level as well... (Maeve)

The main obstacle is probably Irish. In primary school, we didn't do much Irish at all. I've always been fine with English and maths [...]. And then Irish was always the one that I struggled with in school. (Roisin)

The obstacles experienced by participants' friends when attempting to become primary teachers were similar. Eleven out of 17 explicitly mentioned that one barrier faced by their friends was obtaining sufficient points, often related to performance in the Leaving Certificate examinations. This includes not achieving the required points for entry into teacher education programs, covering points achieved across all subjects examined in the Leaving Certificate, including but not limited to Irish. Additionally, ten out of 17 mentioned that another of the barriers faced by their friends was proficiency in the Irish language. This includes struggling with Irish language courses, achieving the required grades, and meeting the points criteria set by educational institutions.

It's quite similar because out of all my friends from school, I'd say like three or four of them wanted to also be primary school teachers, but they didn't get the points in their Leaving Cert. Yeah. So they've gone in through other routes like the humanities course in DCU or early childhood in Marino. It's mainly the points that would be their big obstacle (Ciara)

I suppose in my course, a lot of people were in the same situation where they just didn't get the points initially when they were 18, or [when] they did the Leaving Certificate. Some other people I know maybe didn't get the grade in Irish because speaking in Irish with fluency is a crucial aspect of the job, as we're told that we have to teach Irish language, true Irish, and be able to speak fluently to other teachers and to the children. Some people I know might have got the points but didn't get the Irish qualification to get into the course. So, I think those were the two key obstacles, and that was the case in my course in the PME. (Niall)

One of my friends wanted to be a primary school teacher, and she went into Irish and human development, and she really struggled with the Irish. She was brilliant at Irish in primary and secondary school, but she really struggled with the Irish in college, and then she ended up dropping out like three weeks later or something. (Niamh).

Probably the Irish as well and the points were so high. Like when we were doing I think it was 518 points, it was just really high. (Caitríona)

Probably like getting the grades and getting the points and, you know, getting grinds and keeping up with the higher-level Irish, which is massive to be a teacher. That's probably the hardest bit. You know, kids from DEIS backgrounds, they don't have money to go to talks or get grinds [...] probably a lot of the students that were in my Irish higher-level class wanted to go on and be teachers, but the points are super, super high, and like you have to be well-rounded as well. It's not just Irish; you have to be kind of good at every subject to kind of get those points. So that's what probably people in my class faced. (Orla).

They kind of had the same experience as me. My cousin, she's here as well. She said the same, the Irish, she was afraid she wasn't going to get the grade for Irish. And the points were high. (Maeve).

I say the same thing for all my friends that want to be teachers. My friends in the course. High points would probably put them off. (Eilis)

My friends' obstacles I think was the Irish, in trying to become a primary school teacher. They struggled with their Irish in secondary school and obviously that's a big requirement to become a primary school teacher. So, a lot of them felt discouraged when they didn't get the enough points or the grade that they needed. (Aisling)

One of my friends was fluent into Irish, so she didn't have the Irish obstacle and then she went to an Irish primary school. My other friends have gone into post-primary. I suppose their obstacles would be just that they'd get the points of like maths, science and stuff. But I feel like that's just comes with hard work. I know then people from my course now obstacles that they probably faced, would be the Irish as well. One of my friends that I'd be close to would be the Irish would definitely be the main one... So, I'd say Irish is probably the main one for other people too. (Roisin)

I think the same thing. One of my good friends, she is in the same course, the points was a big obstacle. (Sinead)

Well, again, getting the right amount of points (Clarke)

The higher-level Irish and the leaving certificate. We all found it difficult (Áine)

B. The barrier of socioeconomic factors.

Other obstacles experienced by participants, participant's friends and other people in local area when attempting to become primary teachers also include socioeconomic factors that intersect with educational pathways, and institutional processes.

The cost of education is an obstacle, particularly for those coming from low socioeconomic background or living in marginalised communities. They struggled to afford additional resources like tutoring or grinds, as well as the costs associated with pursuing higher education, such as tuition fees and travel expenses. One student recounted the financial burdens associated with progressing through various stages of education, examinations, and requirements.

I went to a DEIS school, where a lot of the students in secondary school were coming from disadvantaged backgrounds... So, in terms of obstacles, it's probably more the financial side of it...You know, kids from DEIS backgrounds, they don't have money to go to talks or get grinds [...] Many people can't afford to take four years out, especially with unpaid placements. Trying to make your own way and pay your own way for four years is a big thing. The financial side of it is a major deterrent for many. (Orla)

There aren't many resources available. For example, I was receiving extra tutoring at the hub in Kilbarrack where I live with my mom. So, there was a bit of travel involved, and there are no local libraries. (Sinead)

I think the pathway is the most difficult aspect because in my case, I completed a PLC for one year, followed by a three-year bachelor's degree, and then a two-year master's degree. So, the length of time is probably the most challenging factor, along with the financial aspect. The PLC cost around €200, while the bachelor's degree was €3,000 per year for three years, and the master's degree was €5,500 for one year, and that's 2 years long. So, I think the length and the financial aspects to be the two main obstacles. Also, the criteria to become a teacher include obtaining a bachelor's degree, passing the TEG exam, and completing the Leaving Certificate. Moreover, if an interview is conducted during the master's degree, it adds to the requirements. So, there's a lot to get through to secure a place in the teaching profession. And once you're in, the workload is another challenge to manage. (Sorcha)

C. Length and complexity of the pathway.

The length and complexity of the educational pathway are also part of these challenges. The narrative of Sorcha (see quote above) illustrates the lengthy timeline involved in attaining the necessary qualifications, including PLC, bachelor's, and master's degrees, alongside requisite examinations such as the Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (TEG) exam. Other student described the process a "convoluted" sequence of steps, from submitting written applications to undergoing interviews, each marked by prolonged waiting periods.

The process is very long, everything is convoluted. Like I used to do the TEG for staff. There are months in between each of these sorts of process or stage, the TEG for staff. Then you submit a written application to become a candidate to be a teacher. Then you undergo an interview, and then you either get accepted or don't get accepted. Then when you get in, you have the

two years [of PME], and it's fairly intense. And when you finish that, you still have the six months or whatever it is. So, there's a lot to it, and that would be the only obstacle. (Liam)

D. Lack of information, guidance and support.

Furthermore, the journey is characterized by a lack of information, guidance and support, particularly during the early stages. One student lamented the insufficiency of career counselling and mentorship, highlighting that she did not receive adequate advice about her career path in advance.

Before I was introduced to the hub, I didn't really know anything about how to get into primary teaching. I only had knowledge of my own experience in primary school. So, of course, now I can see, but before the hub or anything, there was definitely a lot of either misinformation or lack of information about what the course and the career would be like. (Ciara)

I think it's a lack of knowledge and guidance. Nothing in my area would suggest that you can become a teacher. In school, if you expressed interest in teaching, you could discuss it with your guidance counsellor and ask, 'What's next?' But even then, they weren't too sure what to advise... When I applied here to do the BA in Human Development and Geography, I actually wanted to do Geography and Maths. Maths is one of my strongest subjects, but DCU doesn't really offer Maths as a combination, so that was a bit of a struggle. Then I found out about this other course, Physical Education (PE) and Maths with Education. It's four years at DCU. I wanted to do that, but then I realized I needed a biology-related subject, and I hadn't studied a science subject in school. Now, I would've taken one if someone had told me that in order to be a PE teacher, you need to have a science subject. No one had ever told me that. If someone had come in earlier and said, 'You need to take these different routes,' I shouldn't've just picked whatever subjects I felt like. I would've liked it to be a straightforward route. That was definitely an obstacle, trying to figure out which way to go, and then realizing I didn't have the things I needed. (Niamh)

In terms of lack of support and career guidance, other participants mentioned secondary school teachers or counsellors guiding them towards courses with lower entry requirements, thereby stifling aspirations.

I just feel like the lack of support. Like even with their career guidance people, they're kind of like trying to get you to do a course with lower points. Not even like trying to encourage you to even pick a course with higher points. It's like they're just putting you off. (Aoife)

In my local area, obviously, the points system is a major barrier. In my personal experience, it's the teachers in secondary school. If you're not putting in the work, they don't really push you or help you pursue what you want to do. They tend to discourage you and focus on higher points. If they feel like you won't reach that level, they push you towards something else. (Aisling)

E. Psychological and sociocultural barriers.

Another prevalent theme is the presence of psychological and socio-cultural barriers that prevent individuals from pursuing a teaching career. Psychological barriers include self-doubt, fear of academic challenges, and a lack of confidence in one's abilities. On the other hand, socio-cultural barriers involve the cycle of limited opportunities within certain communities. If parents or individuals in the community have not pursued third-level education, there may be a belief that it is unattainable or difficult to achieve.

I think maybe it might be a case that some children or some teenagers might think, 'I'm not capable of becoming a primary school teacher because I can't get the points for the Leaving Certificate. (Niall)

I take like that you have to put your work in, like you have to study if you want to get into the course. And I think there's kind of sometimes like of fear around school and stuff. Like having to actually go to school and put into work would probably be a barrier for the people around (Eilis)

An obstacle would probably be your own beliefs. It's about whether you believe you can achieve something like the people around you... I feel like there's this cycle, where if parents are not going to third level, then their children most likely will not go to third level. And then, like, it'll just keep repeating because you're looking at what your parents are doing. And I feel like a lot of people kind of just follow that. It's like there's this belief that if you want to go that way, it's difficult. But I feel like it's very ingrained, it's just like a taught system that's built into where I'm from that it's just not achievable. (Roisin)

I think the points like the points for [primary teaching] definitely was like for me [an obstacle]. And then I think also that no one in my family had gone to college. Maybe like there prestige in Ireland like that. Only really fancy people go to college, or whatever looks like. I think the area I was from on the point stand as well (Deirdre)

They don't see it growing up. They don't see anyone [from their local area] go to college and become a teacher. They don't see the opportunity. I feel like it's becoming more of a thing now, like with the Challenger Program. Also, they [the hubs] are telling you how to improve and showing the options. Our teachers as well now are guiding us on what we can do. So, I think the barrier is just a cycle of people not going to college. (Áine)

I think for people, especially in my local area, it's more like the teachers were always from the country, or they were never really from Dublin, especially from my area. It would have been like from a posh place in Dublin. So I think that there's a perception of like, 'Oh, you're from this area, like you can't really make it to become a primary teacher,' or 'That's too hard,' or 'You're never gonna make it.' (Deirdre)

In summary, participants have highlighted various obstacles and barriers in the journey towards a teaching career. Academic challenges, such as meeting Leaving Certificate points and demonstrating fluency in the Irish language, emerge as major barriers. Financial barriers, lack

of guidance and support, along with the lengthy process in becoming a teacher, are also significant obstacles. Finally, psychological barriers, such as self-doubt and a lack of confidence, as well as socio-cultural influences that perpetuate a cycle of limited opportunities, also make pursuing a teaching profession difficult.

4.1.5 Support Systems on the Path to Teaching Careers

Amidst various obstacles and barriers mentioned by the participants, support systems play an important role in providing assistance and encouragement to aspiring teachers. Family emerged as a consistent source of motivation and encouragement, with parents, particularly mothers, keeping students focused on their goals. Teachers are also influential figures in students' journeys. Finally, DCU's community outreach learning hubs emerged as important resources for aspiring teachers. These initiatives provide tailored support, ranging from academic assistance to career guidance, helping students overcome some barriers and pursue their ambitions. The Hub coordinator, in particular, is highlighted as a key figure who motivates students along their journey toward teaching careers.

I suppose when I did feel a bit deflated, when I didn't get the points in the Leaving Cert, the main people that influenced me and supported me were probably my family and then my school as well. My school was really supportive, and they did everything they could to find an alternative route into becoming a primary school teacher. There were a couple of times where I thought I could get into it and then I couldn't, through different programs in DCU. But then my teacher got in touch with the Community Learning Hub, and they said that they would help. They helped me to get into the Professional Master of Education. They gave me more teaching experience teaching Irish, helped me prepare for the interview, prepared me for an oral exam, and the Community Learning Hub in Kilbarrack, Northside Partnership, were hugely supportive. They kept me on track and motivated in my final year of my degree, doing everything they could to help and support me prepare for the interview and the general application process with the PME. So, they were really helpful and supportive. (Niall)

My Irish teacher in sixth year, she helped so much. She took us on extra classes related to Irish and was very supportive. Also, the Hub coordinator. (Caitríona)

There are a lot of people involved, first of all, my secondary school itself, my parents, and the Community Learning Hub. There are many stakeholders in this situation who really kept me on the straight and narrow, pretty much. (Clarke)

I actually have a good group of friends and a supportive family background. At home, my family keeps me motivated, and at college, my friends and I encourage each other to stay on top of our work... Also, when I was in the PLC Course, [the Hub Coordinator], who works in the hub, kept me motivated to pursue the TEG once more. She encouraged me, and that's when I actually got the TEG. So, [the Hub Coordinator] was a huge help in keeping me going. I'm grateful for her support. (Sorcha)

4.1.6 Enhancing Access to Teaching Profession among Underrepresented Communities

In the effort to promote primary and post primary teaching within the local area, students have put forth three main suggestions:

1. Increase awareness and information about teaching profession.
2. Offer support for Irish language and expand access to free grinds or extra tuition for essential subjects.
3. Enhance visibility and accessibility of learning hubs.

There is a strong inclination among the students, with thirteen out of 17 participants expressing the need for greater awareness and information about the teaching profession, its requirements, and the pathways to becoming a teacher. This includes bringing in recent graduates and qualified teachers to speak to students about the job, its positive aspect, and the various routes available.

I think raising awareness of the job and I think if more qualified teachers who are maybe just finished college or maybe in the later stages of the courses were to talk to pupils in schools and maybe just make them aware of what the job was all about, what ways they can become, become a teacher and what routes there are to becoming a teacher (Niall)

Know more about the routes to get into college and to get into, maybe not just college, but to get into post-primary and primary school. (Niamh)

Probably just bringing people in to talk about it and to promote that you can do it, and if you work hard enough, you can get there. And the supports that are available for students, you know, no matter your background or your circumstances, so that you know you can do it. (Orla)

Advertising doesn't need to be done extensively because it is such a well-known profession. So, I believe the focus should be on encouraging more students and informing them of the rewards, despite the challenges. If they emphasize the positive aspects and convey to students that teaching is a worthwhile job, it could make a difference. (Sorcha)

There's a shadowing day going on today. I definitely think allowing children to come to college and experience just a day, or sitting in on a lecture and seeing what it's like. Because I actually did that with the hub. (Deirdre)

I'd say bring in either past pupils who are now in the Bachelor of Education course or even primary teachers from the local area. Because I remember last year in my secondary school, they did a career day where they brought in loads of different people from different courses. But surprisingly, they didn't bring in anyone from a primary teaching background, which is what I felt like I really needed to be able to talk to. So they could definitely do more, bringing in people actually experiencing the course and the career (Ciara).

Another student drew attention to a perceived stigma associated with pursuing teaching, emphasising the need for efforts to address and dispel this stigma while promoting the numerous benefits of education and teaching.

There were only two or three people from my school who had gone to [hubs]. It was available for everyone. Everyone should have jumped on board, you know that. But they didn't. So, I feel like, I don't know why there's a stigma or why people should be ashamed [...]. There's definitely a stigma for putting in the work and going to school [...]. Maybe if there was an online option, more people would attend them. (Niamh)

Participants also mentioned support is needed for subjects like Irish or other subjects. This includes free grinds or extra tuition to help students achieve the required grades.

Probably more help with the Irish. I say if people could get the Irish, they would, but people give up. It's either maths or Irish, and if they can't get one, they drop the other. (Caitríona)

I keep going back to secondary school, the grinds and everything. I think people need help with certain subject areas that would increase their access to teaching profession. (Maeve)

I think, grinds are a huge thing just with the academic side of it. Grinds and financial side of it. (Sinead)

The learning hubs is already providing additional support and resources for aspiring teachers, such as providing comprehensive information about pathways to becoming a primary teacher, Irish language proficiency, subject-specific tuition, and financial support. Therefore, some participants mentioned the role of learning hubs as a key support in increasing access to the teaching profession.

I suppose for me, a key support was the learning hub. They offer free classes where students are taught higher level Irish and receive additional tuition. It's free for secondary school pupils who are doing higher level Irish in the area, a key area where people struggle a lot. In my school, there were only two of us doing higher level Irish out of a year group of 50 or 60 students. So, I said my teacher was in a difficult position where he had to teach ordinary level and higher level at the same time, which was quite challenging. I found it quite challenging myself because he had to divide his attention between us and the rest of the class. However, the extra tuition provided by the learning hub allowed me to develop my Irish further and receive the exam-focused support I needed. Achieving a high grade in higher level Irish is crucial for aspiring teachers, so this additional support was invaluable. The hub also provided guidance on qualifications and the path to becoming a teacher, and also assisted me in my application process for the PME. (Niall)

I'd say the additional classes that the learning hub offers help a lot. And I believe more people need to know about them because not many people are aware of the learning hub. It's not widely known, so not many people realize that they can get help. (Caitríona)

I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I know the learning hub did help a lot. Definitely, if more people knew about the learning hub and they advertised it a bit more, that would definitely be an additional support. (Eilis)

There are a couple of additional supports that would be useful to young people. I find that the free grinds from the learning hub really do help, especially when it comes to subjects like Irish and English, which are core subjects. People may choose to focus on other subjects, but they'll definitely need to learn English and math because they're constant requirements. Since we have the learning hub, it's great, and I think we should try to expand on resources like that. (Clarke)

4.2 Participation in the DCU Learning Hubs

Participants attended one of the DCU Learning Hubs: Finglas, Darndale-Coolock, or Kilbarrack (See Figure 3). In the following sections, we will explore the channels for accessing the hubs, the reasons for participants' involvement, and the ways the hubs support students' educational journeys.

4.2.1 Accessing the DCU Learning Hubs

Students learned about the hub through different channels.

1. *Hub Engagement*: Outreach efforts by hub coordinators or representatives to directly inform and engage individuals or groups about the opportunities provided by the hubs.
2. *School Referrals*: Teachers and guidance counsellors, or school programs informing students about the hubs and encouraging their involvement.
3. *Peer Recommendation*: Students recommending the hub programs or services to their friends or classmates.
4. *Social Media Platforms*: Such as Facebook, where advertisements or posts about hub activities are regularly shared.
5. *Social Welfare Programs*: Individuals being referred to the hubs by welfare agencies or programs aimed at assisting individuals in transitioning back to work or education.

Hub engagement stands out as the main channels for raising awareness about the hubs. Hub coordinators actively engage with schools through interaction and communication. Moreover, they personally visit individual classes to introduce students to the hubs and encourage their involvement.

My school is linked in with the learning hubs. I think they deal with Coolock and Kilbarrack. (Niamh)

So [Hub coordinator] came to my PLC, and she told us about the hub, mentioning that it offers free extra help, like extracurricular classes, covering various subjects, not just ours. [The hub coordinator] also informed me about it and encouraged me to attend, emphasizing the value of extra support. They said, "Why not give it a try? If you don't like it, you don't have to continue, but it's worth experiencing." So, I attended once, and I

really enjoyed it. It was a rewarding experience, especially for improving my Irish skills. (Sorcha)

So I did my PLC, so I was in class and that's how I knew of the hub. The hub coordinator came in and told us that we can apply for Irish grinds in the hub. I think it was every Monday night. So, we all just signed up, and because everyone in my PLC wanted to do teaching, Irish was a barrier. So, we all wanted to do Irish. So that's why if we went to do the extra grinds, it was like helping us with Irish really. So, it was good support to have. (Roisin)

School referrals are other important channel for hub awareness, with eight out of 17 participants noting that they became aware of the hub through teachers or school guidance counsellors. Four participants mentioned learning about the hub through their friends and peers.

I decided to participate in the hub in sixth year. At the very start of sixth year, our guidance counsellor came into our weekly guidance counselling classes. She told us about the hub, mentioning that it catered towards primary PE students who want to pursue primary teaching. She mentioned they offered grinds for subjects like math, English, Irish, as well as orals and other support. So, I found out about it through my guidance counsellor at school. By the end, there were probably around 20 people from my school year who would regularly attend the hub... My school counsellor was really pushing everyone to go to the hub. (Ciara)

I found out about it in school. My guidance counsellor put me on to [hub coordinator], and she got me in through that way... I really needed the Irish, the extra Irish help. I think that was my big struggle, and I just couldn't afford private grinds at the time or having someone come in and do it one-on-one. So, this was my only option. (Sinead)

They kind of briefly mentioned it in school and then my friend was saying that she was going, and she invited me to go along with it. (Aoife)

For mature students, one individual mentioned being directed to the hub as part of a back-to-work program after leaving their job and being on social welfare. Lastly, another mature student found out about the hub through social media, specifically Facebook.

It was after I left my job; I was on social welfare, so they sent me over to the hub to do a back-to-work program, like a course or something. While I was there, I mentioned that I was interested in becoming a teacher and that I knew I had to do the TEG and stuff like that, but I thought I would have to figure that out on my own. Somebody there obviously put me in touch with [hub coordinator]. (Liam)

It came up on my Facebook page as an advertisement, and that's how I found out about it. (Siobhán)

The diverse range of channels through which students learned about the hubs highlights the comprehensive outreach efforts and the hubs' importance as a resource for education and support.

4.2.2 Reasons for Participation in the Hub

Participants joined the hub for diverse reasons. Most of them sought academic support and were attracted to the hub for free grinds in subjects like math, English, and Irish, which provided crucial support for exams like the Leaving Certificate and TEG. Other participants were drawn to the hub's tailored assistance, offering mock interviews, oral exam practice, financial support (funding for tuition fees or additional educational resources), and guidance for pursuing teaching qualifications. The hub's cost-free services and support were compelling factors, especially for those unable to afford private grinds or tuition fees.

So, I actually found out about it in 5th year. I found out through a friend. She knew I wanted to get high points, so she knew I was struggling. She said, "Listen, it's free." I decided to participate probably because I needed the extra help, and that was the only option, and it was free. (Deirdre)

It was my secondary school. They told me that there was a hub where I could help out, in terms of teaching Irish classes... Initially, when the school informed me about it, they offered me a position as an Irish teacher with the hub. I was teaching higher-level students who also wanted to become teachers. So, that was the first step. As I became more engaged with the hub and took on leadership roles within the community learning hub in that area, I received support from the hub coordinator. She allowed me to do a mock interview for the PME and a mock oral exam for the Irish oral exam... This support was the main reason I decided to get involved with the hub, initially as a teacher and then to gain experience teaching Irish. Through continued engagement, the hub offered me further support, and I even received funding for the first year of my PME tuition fees. They have several funding programs for students, which might not be eligible for SUSI but are eligible for this funding. Overall, the hub provided a wealth of resources and support, which were incredibly beneficial. (Niall)

Recommendations from friends, teachers, and guidance counsellors were instrumental in generating interest and encouraging participation. Although motivations are varied, they all aligned with the hub's dedication to providing support and facilitating progress towards their career aspirations in teaching.

4.2.3 Multifaceted Support Services in DCU Learning Hubs

The DCU Learning Hubs supported participants in various ways in their journey to teaching profession (See Table 3).

Support Provided	Description
Grinds (Extra-Classes)	Many students mentioned attending regular grinds or extra classes focused on specific subjects like Irish, Maths, Geography, etc. These sessions provided additional instruction, practice, and support in small groups, helping them understand the material better and improve their grades.
Support for Exam Preparation	The hubs offered support in preparing for exams like the Leaving Certificate and the TEG exam. This support included providing study materials, extra notes, and exam-focused practice.
Mock Interviews	Hubs organized mock interviews to help students prepare for real interviews, whether for college admission or other purposes. These sessions provided valuable experience and feedback.
Application Support	Hubs supported students through the application process for college or specific programs. This included help with filling out forms, understanding admission requirements, and organizing necessary documents.
Emotional Support and Encouragement	Beyond academic assistance, hubs provided emotional support, encouragement, and motivation to students, especially during challenging times like exam preparation or disappointment over results. They offered guidance, understanding, and practical help to cope with setbacks and find alternative pathways to achieve their goals.
Support for Specific Needs	Some students received tailored support for their individual needs, such as struggling with particular subjects like Irish or needing to pass specific exams for college admission. Moreover, mature students were offered support to enhance their technical skills through specific training programs.
Advice and Guidance	Students received advice and guidance on various aspects, including application processes, funding, and finding alternative routes if they did not meet specific requirements.
Free Resources and Grants	The hubs provided free grinds and additional resources, such as books, along with other grants to support educational expenses.
Practical Learning Experiences	Participants had the opportunity to participate in practical experiences, such as visiting St. Patrick's campus. Additionally, some had the chance to gain practical teaching experience.

Table 5. Support Services provided by Hubs to Participants

Students experienced a diverse range of support tailored to their needs and aspirations. One significant aspect of this support was the provision of grinds. Among the participants, fifteen individuals mentioned the assistance they received in subjects such as Irish, Maths, and English. These sessions, often conducted in small groups, offered additional instruction and practice crucial for exam preparation, especially for the Leaving Certificate and TEG exams. Participants attribute their improved grades and increased confidence to those grind sessions.

Definitely the grinds. I went to the hub for Irish, Maths, and Geography grinds. I found them really helpful, and they were in small groups—only like

three or four of us in a group. It was every week, which was close to my Leaving Certificate... sometimes when you're trying to study, you can't focus, but at least going to these grinds, you're being immersed in it... So, they definitely helped. I'm sure they improved my grades. My confidence definitely grew a lot in many of the subjects that I may have struggled in, and that helped me get into college. (Niamh)

Just the grinds in itself, every week, and they also supported us to do the tech course in DCU at night. So, I did that at the same time as I was doing the grinds for the Leaving Certificate. And then just the support for mock interviews and things like that, because I think it was over two years that I was in the hub for the grinds. So yeah, in all aspects, they helped. (Siobhán)

The tutor, he offered, extra notes, extra insight, and practice, kind of exam-focused on the Leaving Certificate. He was maybe fresh out of teaching as well, so he brought that newness, from his experience, it was more kind of close to ours and where we wanted to go. It was the same people from a disadvantaged area, so you knew they were struggling and how you were kind of in the same boat as them. (Orla)

The Irish grinds were great; I couldn't have done without them. They helped me so much. The teacher we had was great; I think it was every Tuesday evening we'd go down, and the woman who ran them, she was really supportive. She'd always make sure to answer all of our questions. And yeah, during the Irish sessions, they'd always give us sheets. I remember one day they focused on preparing for the oral exam. We'd have a whole day on a Saturday where we'd just practice everything for the oral, and it helped so much with my level of Irish. (Maeve)

I did grinds there, and also online grinds during Covid for subjects like maths, which helped me a lot because I needed to pass my maths exam to get into the course. It was a requirement. And then they've helped me so much since I've gotten into the course; I got in with their help. (Eilis)

They supported me with Irish because that was my main focus. We went over the Leaving Cert Irish material. They covered aspects like the oral exam, which involved a lot of spoken Irish, as well as essay answers. So, they guided us through what we wouldn't have been studying for otherwise... I suppose it was just helping us immerse ourselves more in Irish and get additional support with the language. (Roisin)

Well, like they're pretty helpful because offered like free grinds up until to the leaving Certificate exams themselves, which was really great. They even gave me help like the night before of my Irish exam. They are very reliable people, and they gave you a lots of notes everything, a lot of resources too, which again, would really help with like Irish essay, writing and everything. (Clarke)

I did the Irish classes, and I had studied for my oral, which would have counted contributed at the end of the academic year for the PLC. But then Covid happened, and we had predicted grades. So I had already been studying for the oral. My teachers took note of my progress and assessed my

performance. This was crucial because my predicted grade would have depended on it. They were the ones responsible for assigning my grades and determining my eligibility for DCU. It was because of the extra classes that my skills improved, which ultimately influenced my teachers' decision in assigning my grade and gaining admission to DCU. (Sorcha)

The Irish facilities were amazing. Our Irish teacher, who had graduated from the Bachelor of Education, provided us with many tips on what the examiners look for in our orals and written work. She gave us a lot of guidance on how to achieve higher marks in the Bachelor of Education. (Clarke)

The hubs also offered comprehensive assistance in exam preparation beyond subject-specific grinds. About ten students specifically highlighted the support and guidance received in exam preparation such as Leaving Certificate or TEG. This support included study materials, extra notes, and exam-focused practice, ensuring students were well prepared for their exams. Furthermore, mock interviews provided valuable experience and feedback, helping students prepare for real-life interview scenarios, whether for college admission or other purposes. Additionally, the hubs facilitated the application process for college or specific programs, offering guidance on filling out forms, understanding admission requirements, and organizing necessary documents.

I suppose just the mock interviews and the [practical] experience teaching arts [in the hubs]. (Niall)

They provided structure to my preparation; like, I had the TEG coming up. They were quite helpful in terms of the preparation. The written applications, in a way, assisted me greatly. It was a sort of help I hadn't experienced before; my previous college card application wasn't of that nature. Also, they helped me a lot with that. Even for the interviews, I think we had someone to assist with a mock interview, which was really beneficial because, again, I didn't know what to expect. While I had been to hundreds of meetings, I hadn't done an interview about myself in that way before... They assisted me in getting the funding together and handling other administrative aspects, which was kind of side things, and supported me through the application process. (Liam)

They helped me in a lot of ways. So, one of the ways was that I engaged in online Irish classes for my TEG exam, and they were amazing. Just having that extra contact with people to speak Irish because during COVID there's no one really around that you can speak Irish to. And it was great to go back over the grammar and the words that I needed for the interview. And then as well, when I was going through the interview process, they put me in contact with people that I could do a mock interview with, which was great. So, I could feel a little bit at ease knowing the type of questions that might come up and how to formally answer them. And then they gave me feedback at the end, so let me know maybe where I could steer different questions in different ways and maybe what I should focus more on something that I said. (Aisling)

Beyond academic support, the hubs served as pillars of emotional encouragement and practical guidance. Students highlighted the importance of the hubs in providing motivation during challenging times, such as exam preparation or uncertainty about their future pathways. The hub coordinators emerged as key figures in this support system, offering personalized

guidance, references, and support beyond academic assistance. They helped students explore alternative pathways into their desired fields, arranged shadowing days, and provided opportunities for practical experiences, such as visits to relevant campuses.

They really pushed us. They encouraged us not to give up. They understood our struggles and provided extensive support. For instance, with Irish, they went above and beyond, being available 24/7. They also arranged English grinds and dedicated maths days, where someone would guide us through exam papers. They were very responsive to our needs. If we requested additional maths classes, they were quick to organize them. (Sinead)

The Irish course is the main one that really helped. That was great. Like, I don't think I would've been able to [pass my exam], but also, we took a trip to St. Pat's campus and were able to see and visualize it more. Like, I could actually see myself going here at that point. (Aoife)

Definitely the grinds, especially for maths and English. I didn't need Irish as much since I leaned towards global studies, but it still helped. The hub coordinator was incredibly helpful. She gave me other options and patiently guided me through various services, even when I felt lost. She provided references and support beyond just the grinds. She was far more helpful than my school's career guidance counsellor, showing me alternative pathways into my desired field. She arranged shadowing days and provided opportunities I wouldn't have had otherwise. (Deirdre)

Furthermore, the learning hubs provided financial assistance through grants. These grants were particularly beneficial for allowing students to access additional resources, such as books and study materials, or cover tuition fees for specialised courses.

They gave us grants... and when we didn't get the points, they tried to help us find routes for getting in. When I didn't get enough points, I was down. I think that's 50 points. And you work. They helped me look for routes. It is how I got into the program. (Áine)

They helped with Irish, and they put on additional classes for subjects like maths and whatever I needed. I was struggling with art, and [hub coordinator] came down with art books for me and everything. She was a lifesaver. (Caitríona)

Through various testimonials, the participants' quotes demonstrate the multifaceted support of the hubs, including academic assistance, mock interviews, practical experiences, and financial aid, all of which contribute to preparing students for their career paths in teaching.

4.2.4 Enhancing Hubs for Future Participants

Participants acknowledge the role the hubs played in providing both general and tailored support throughout the journey to becoming teachers. This support extends beyond mere financial and academic assistance, encompassing emotional support, motivation, and encouragement, all of which contribute to building their confidence. Based on participants' experiences, recommendations for enhancing the hubs focus on three key areas: a) increasing promotion and awareness of the hubs, b) providing ongoing support to former students of the

hubs, c) improving and expanding facilities, and d) creating opportunities for social interaction among students.

The primary recommendation is to increase awareness, improve promotion strategies, and expand outreach efforts to ensure that more individuals have access to the support services offered by the hubs. Suggestions include not only promoting and increasing awareness within schools but also within the local community.

I'm not a hundred percent sure. I think maybe just promotion, further promotion in schools. I was involved in one of the earlier years of the Hub, and they were hugely supportive. [...]. I was talking to [Hub coordinator], and she said they've been working really hard on promoting them out, I think in the last year or so, and the attendance at the classes, especially the art classes, was huge. So I can see that the hub is definitely growing. Initially, I might have said that maybe the promotional end of things could be improved, and more awareness could be raised about the hub. But I think they've done a lot of work towards that in the last year, and they continue to do so. So I tell you, just that they continue to raise awareness in the local area, that's the main thing. (Niall)

I'm not too sure. I think they really did help me, but not a lot of people know about the hubs. Like when we were in school, there were only two or three people from my school doing it. So, I think maybe they could promote themselves a bit more because they are a great help. (Sinead)

I don't think there are any physical improvements that are needed for the hubs. I believe the teachers are great, and the course content is excellent as well. They covered exactly what was outlined in the course and what needed to be learned. They were open to students asking questions, exploring specific areas of interest, and providing support where needed. It was welcoming to inquire about additional assistance. The only thing that comes to mind for improvement is advertising. I attended because [Hub Coordinator] was coming to my college, and I think broader promotion, especially in secondary schools, would be beneficial. This is crucial as the next step for many students is college, and informing them about available opportunities is essential. (Sorcha)

Personally, I had such a good experience with the hubs that, and because it was online, I don't see any need for improvements. Obviously, there might be some room for improvement from what other people may say. Well, personally, I think they're doing a really good job at engaging people and trying to help them with their process of becoming a teacher... If I'm honest, the only thing I can think of is maybe to let schools know about the hub. I didn't hear about the hub until I was in my final year of education. Maybe if I had known about the hub, I could have gotten the extra support that I needed and could have improved my points or even my grades. So, just letting schools know that they're there and maybe putting flyers up around the school, because if I had seen it, I probably would've gone (Aisling)

Getting out there and letting people know about them. I think that's the only thing they need to work on is spreading the word about it [...] Keep going the way they're going and make sure everyone's aware of them. (Caitríona)

I think the hub in itself is really good [but] I never heard about it before until my friend told me. I think they should try promote it more in secondary schools because a lot of people didn't know about it [...] I think just being there for them, and promoting primary school teaching a lot to children in disadvantaged areas because, as I said, a lot of people don't think they'd be able for it. And if they picture a teacher, they don't picture themselves, so I do think promoting it a lot will help. (Maeve)

I think if more people from the hubs went to secondary schools and spoke to people studying for their Leaving Cert a bit more, like advertised it and stuff, that would help." (Eilis)

Maybe letting people know they're there a bit more. Like, I was only aware of it through the social welfare building. But yeah, after that now, I think it's really well run. And the building is obviously new, quite clean, and well-kept, and the staff are friendly. I don't know what else they could be doing, really. (Liam)

I suppose if the hubs, my hub wasn't linked to a school, but if the hubs are linked to schools, they can show the students in schools. Like these are a way, if you're struggling, if you have an idea in your head that you want to go into teaching, but you feel it's not possible for yourself, that here's an extra support that's available, so that the students in schools are aware. I suppose it is a point of just promoting the hubs because I don't think I wouldn't have heard of one until I was in the PLC, and just that people know that there's extra support there for them. (Roisin)

Just getting the information about the hubs out there that's actually available to people in the area. There were only a few people from my school who actually went to it. I don't think they knew about it, really? That's really sad. And they would've benefited from it. (Aoife)

Another recommendation is to provide ongoing support and check-ins with former hub participants to see how they are progressing in the B.Ed. or PME and if they need any additional assistance. This ensures that students feel supported and equipped to overcome obstacles they may encounter during their studies. Additionally, there's a suggestion to offer continuous support, especially in challenging subjects like Irish, throughout the duration of the program.

I think by continuing to do what they are doing, it's really helpful. There's always someone we can check in with if we need any help or additional support. (Eilis)

Continue support maybe could be dropping down, dropping an email to see if how they're getting on and if there's any additional support they might need. Like myself, I was struggling with lesson plans and my progression schemes and I didn't put forward, I didn't say anything until the very last minute. And then that's when the family friend got in contact with someone from the Hub and they were there giving support, but I felt as though I was a little bit of a burden maybe asking for that support. (Aisling)

Even more support, like with Irish, continuously, during college or meetups just to catch up or see if you need any assistance. It could help, especially

for those who want to go back and teach in primary schools, like my sister wanted to do. There were so many obstacles in her way to do it. (Aoife)

The B.Ed. is hard enough as it is, and Irish keeps getting harder. Having three classes a week on Irish and still sitting there scratching your head, it's still difficult. So, maybe keeping up the Irish throughout the program would be helpful. (Sinead)

For me [as mature student], there were a lot of obstacles related to technology and transitioning back to doing everything online. Maybe being more prepared for the workload in such a short amount of time, especially for going into the masters, would have been helpful. (Siobhán)

Another participant suggested that one of the current hub facilities has limited space and requires larger areas to accommodate more people.

I'd say the size of the building we were in the hub. I just felt the space was very limited. The rooms were quite small, especially towards the end of the year when so many people from at least five or six different schools in the area were coming. It was getting quite cramped in the room. So I'd say they could definitely invest in bigger spaces for the grounds. (Ciara)

Finally, another recommendation was to facilitate more opportunities for socializing and interaction among students, providing a space where they can meet others in similar situations and practice together, which can be beneficial for their learning and preparation.

I think there should be more socializing in person. I think there needs to be more socializing, meeting other people that are in the same boat (Áine)

It could become a place where people could go and practice. I ended up doing that with a fellow [...] we met up in a Cafe and sat there all day, just the two days, talking Irish, and it was great help towards preparing for, I'm saying as well as having classes that maybe there would be an hour a week where people could go and have a social practice time, if that makes sense. (Liam)

4.3 Career and Expectations

Transitioning from the support provided by the learning hubs to their tertiary education journey at DCU Institute of Education, students' experiences reflect a seamless continuum of growth. The following sections shows progress of participants into tertiary education in the teaching profession and their experience in DCU Educational programmes and college life.

4.3.1 Experiences on DCU Educational Programs and College Life

The experiences of various students enrolled in an educational program, particularly the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) and the Professional Master of Education (PME), are diverse. These students express both positive and challenging aspects of their academic journey,

covering topics such as course structure, social dynamics, campus facilities, and personal struggles.

In this exploration of student experiences at Dublin City University (DCU), various aspects shaping their academic journey and social interactions emerged in this exploration. From course structures to campus facilities, cultural diversity to social dynamics, and the prevalence of stereotypes and misconceptions, students provide valuable insights into their diverse experiences within the DCU community.

A. Course Structure and Content

Students expressed overall satisfaction with their courses, feeling well-equipped for teaching after completion. The teaching programs incorporate placements in various educational settings providing valuable practical experience. However, others mentioned the overwhelming workload, especially during assessment period. Some students, especially those enrolled in the PME, highlighted the intensity of their courses, noting the compression of 4 years' content into two years. Despite the workload, many students expressed satisfaction with the quality of education and the preparation received for their future careers as teachers.

Well, this year, the Bachelor of Education course has been great so far. They've provided us with all the resources to succeed, such as discussions on topics like statements of learning outcomes and learning intentions. These are aspects that we as students might not have talked about much, but they are very important when you're being trained to become a teacher. (Clarke)

It was really good. It was quite structured, timetable-wise. I was in class five days a week. Some days, I only had two-hour classes. I think my longest day would have been maybe five or six hours, in comparison to the master's degree. It was much more manageable in terms of time and workload. It seemed difficult at the time, but looking back, it was quite an easy timetable to handle. (Sorcha)

I opted for the two-year Professional Master of Education after my degree. It was intense, packing Bachelor of Education content. The first year focused on curricular subjects and experiential learning, immersing us in both teaching and learning. We delved into behaviour management, psychology, and philosophy. Specialisms like climate change education were offered, alongside five placements—two in the first year and three in the second, covering junior and senior levels. Despite the workload, I felt well-prepared for teaching, confident in every subject and equipped with effective behaviour management strategies. The holistic experience left me feeling informed and capable for the job, despite the course being half the length of a Bachelor's degree. Overall, it was a well-organized and enriching course. (Niall)

B. Campus Facilities

Students generally compliment the facilities and environment of their college campuses. They appreciate the modern facilities, including libraries equipped with academic resources and study areas. The campuses are described as welcoming, calm, and conducive to learning, with easy access to amenities like cafes and study spaces. However, concerns are raised about the

affordability of on-campus dining options and the accessibility of certain facilities, particularly for students with family responsibilities.

St. Patrick's campus was a very welcoming place, even when I came in to look around the college with [the Hub Coordinator], it was very welcoming. And it's bright. And it's a nice place. It's definitely welcoming (Deirdre)

It's really good; I find the facilities are really up to date, and everything is new. I enjoy the library; I always go into the library, and I think that's a great part. It's located well for me. I have to get two buses, but I honestly don't mind. I actually like it in the morning. It's fine. (Maeve)

It's been a positive experience. everything's clearly laid out. It's easy to find places... the cafeteria when I was in my undergrad was a great place. There was lots of good deals, but now it's gone a little bit overpriced, but now it's great now that they have a shop on campus as well. (Aisling)

There are lots of societies where you have opportunities to gain teaching experience even before you enter the course. There are also those nice places where you can chat with your friends, like around the campus. The canteen and the library are quite nice places. It's a very small library, and it's easy to find everything. I think because of the size of the campus as well, it's very easy to navigate. Being in Drumcondra is quite a nice area too. So, I think the size of the college, both this one and All Hallows, which I have visited a few times as well, the size and the small community in the college are quite nice. It helps to become closer to everyone in the college too. So yeah, that's probably the nicest part about it. (Niall)

C. Academic and Social Environments

The dynamics of students' academic and social environments vary based on their experiences and circumstances. Some students express satisfaction with their courses, highlighting supportive lecturers, engaging modules, and sense of community and peer support. Others mention initial challenges, such as a lack of guidance and support during the course or feeling overwhelmed by workload, but eventually find enjoyment in their academic journey, particularly during placements.

I really like it. I've had a good experience on this course. I feel like I've gotten good friends and the majority of lecturers and staff are really supportive. And we've had teacher fellows in, so they're like partner school teachers that are coming in, and I feel like they have really good first-hand knowledge of the career that helps. I like the course. I think it's really broad. It's given us an experience in every subject; we've done English, Irish, maths, then all the art subjects like history, geography. We've had a good experience with all of them. I've had an overall good experience on the course, placements and stuff, and I feel like it's given us a good experience as the job. (Roisin)

Initially it was quite hard. There wasn't much guidance provided, like "This is how you do activities" or "This is how you reference." It felt more like, "Here's an assignment, get it done." I struggled a lot, especially since I was used to being close to my friends at school. Suddenly being on my own.

Thankfully, I knew a girl in my course, and I knew her from the Hub. So, we decided to stick together. It was comforting to have each other's support, especially since we were all facing similar challenges with workload and adjusting to college life. Despite the initial difficulties, I've found myself enjoying the experience so far, particularly during our placements. (Deirdre)

There wasn't much support. I know people mentioned to me afterward that there are groups for mature students, but I still felt quite alone. It took me a long time to get settled and wrap my head around the entire course, you know? There was nobody else near my age in my course. Maybe there were mature students in other courses, but I didn't meet anyone else who had been in the Hubs or anything like that. It was just sort of, 'That's it, you're in now, and off you go.' (Siobhán)

On the social front, students describe diverse experiences. Some enjoy making friends from different backgrounds, finding the college community welcoming and friendly. However, others face feelings of isolation, especially if they don't have pre-existing connections or if they have personal challenges like commuting to campus or being mature students. Some mention the formation of cliques within the student body, while others appreciate the inclusive nature of their college community.

You are surrounded by people with the same interests as you [...] and it's nice to be surrounded by people who share a similar passion for teaching. We were able to talk about our concerns about the job. We were able to discuss our experiences teaching before or during placements. I think it's a very supportive culture at St. Patrick's College. Among the lecturers, they are helpful towards us as well. (Niall)

I've really enjoyed the course so far. I've made so many friends from different areas, and it's just been a great experience. Everybody's so friendly. I haven't met one bad person, and I just enjoy coming here every day. I think it's great. The courses and the lectures are really helpful, so I really enjoy it. (Maeve)

I'm really enjoying the modules and everything. It's great in that sense. It's fun. The modules change every semester, so you're not stuck on something you wouldn't particularly like. But it was very daunting, the force of 450 people, transitioning from secondary school to that. And I find some people, if they're from the countryside or something, already know someone, so they tend to stick with them. Or if they're living on campus, they tend to stick with their roommates and won't really interact with others. It's a kind of isolating experience in that sense. (Aoife)

How have I experienced... Well, it was just going in for lectures and, that was, you know, I didn't do any socializing. I was literally there to study, and, you know, I'm older, I have a family, so my experience than younger people, it's very different, you know? So, you know, I was literally in for lectures and to the library, and that was it. (Siobhán)

One student pointed out that financial constraints during her academic journey limited her ability to socialize.

I've really enjoyed it so far. The only aspect that I don't think is great is the financial side. People come into college, and they say it's all about being

social and making friends. But I find that really hard because all of these friends are going out on the weekends or they're able to go for lunch across the road, whereas I don't have the funds to support that. I can't go along and do these things, so I'm really missing out on that aspect. They'll come in on a Monday morning and they're talking about what they've done on the weekend together, their social side of things, whereas I don't have that. It's all about the education side, and I find that really hard. (Sinead)

D. Cultural Diversity and Representation

Students in DCU comes from Dublin and various regions and backgrounds across Ireland. While there is an appreciation for this diversity, concerns have been raised about the lack of representation, particularly in certain academic programs such as teaching courses, where individuals from diverse ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds, including those from DEIS schools, may be underrepresented.

DCU, St. Patrick's, does have a very wide range of cultures, since there are students from all over the country rather than just from Dublin. You can see two different worlds, really, one to one's, and you get to see different ideas on education. (Clarke)

My school was very Irish. It was just Irish people; we had no foreigners. But in DCU, there is a mix of ethnicities and different cultures that all come together and blend in college. (Deirdre)

On the course very few are people coming from quite not affluent backgrounds. But, you know, a lot of the people are coming from, you know, they have cars and they don't really worry about money as such. But there's one or two probably similar to my case. But it's something you would kind of see probably throughout the B.Ed. There's not many people who went to a DEIS school or people who know what a DEIS school was before they entered the course. There's probably only two of us that probably are coming from my kind of backgrounds and DEIS School. So yes, not many. (Student 7)

I love the atmosphere, although there aren't many people from Dublin, I'd say. It's more like Kildare or Meath. I feel like in St. Patrick's and All Hallows, everyone is so friendly with each other. It's almost like all the different years, all the different courses, you don't feel awkward approaching someone or asking someone a question. You feel like you can approach anyone and talk to them. It's great, very welcoming, I'd say. (Clarke)

E. Social Dynamics

The social dynamics in DCU are complex, reflecting a diverse student body with varied backgrounds and experiences. While there is a sense of inclusivity and collaboration among many students, there are also patterns of social cliques and perceived differences, particularly between urban and rural backgrounds. Some students felt that those from outside of Dublin may have formed closer connections due to shared experiences and living in on-campus accommodation, while those from Dublin area may have felt slightly excluded initially.

Stereotypes about certain areas, such as Finglas or Ballymun, further influence social interactions, sometimes leading to feelings of exclusion or the need to defend one's community.

I feel like, growing up, it was just a norm to me. And then when I came to second level, to third level, is when I realised that we are at a disadvantage when it comes to getting into third level. Because growing up, we were never told, like, 'Oh, you're in a DEIS school'... I feel like you get so used to your norm, and then when you come in here, you're the minority... I don't have a strong Dublin accent; some people think I do... I don't know if it's my accent that's not taken seriously; it could just be me being paranoid. (Student 11)

So, in DCU, there are a lot of people from the country in the bachelor's and master's degree. Especially in the master's degree, I am one of the few people from Dublin. And there's only one student I know from Tallaght, and myself, and him would not be from a disadvantage class. But the way we speak would be different from other students and the country people. So if there is a big difference, it's even in the way that I speak. (Sorcha)

I feel like we didn't socialise as well with people from the countryside; they all looked at us like, "Are they from Dublin?" So, there's a lot of cliques. In this course, where we're all mixing together. And then from our local area, it's totally different. People just don't understand the same background as us. There are a lot of people from posh areas—like, not posh, but higher-class incomes. (Áine)

F. Misconceptions and Stereotypes

Several students highlighted the existence of misconceptions and stereotypes associated with their communities within academic settings, often influenced by media portrayals and societal biases. They may view areas such as Finglas, Kilbarrack, Ballymun, and Coolock as plagued by crime, poverty, and other social issues, leading to the stigmatization of residents from these communities. Some students expressed frustration with the portrayal of these areas in a negative light. They noted instances where even lecturers have contributed to these negative perceptions. However, these students argue that such stereotypes are unfounded and do not reflect the reality of these communities. They emphasize the need to challenge these misconceptions.

[when] you say [are from] Finglas, they kind of look at you a bit weird. I feel like there's like lots of stereotypes based on like these areas. Even one of the lecturers the other day said something about Ballymun, like it was like not a good place to teach compared to somewhere in the country. (Aoife)

I suppose there are people in the course who are, you know, no different, are from similar areas. But then there are people who are quite not familiar with areas like [Kilbarrack]. So they have perceived ideas in their head of what places are like and people are like based on what they've read or what they've seen. You know, it's not based on what's real. And I suppose you've just got such a mixture of people in the course. And there are lots of different ideas, I suppose. (Student 5)

I wouldn't say they're portrayed well just because there's a lot of stigma. Just like a lot of misinformation about crime and violence in Finglas. For example, Ballymun is very close to me as well. Like, for example, one of our teachers in the religion lectures was discussing how people's lives in Ballymun area, not of great quality. I just thought that was quite a misinformed statement to make because I have friends from Ballymun, and I find it really doesn't matter where you're from; it's about the community, the people rather than the actual area. So I just think there's a lot of stigma against those places because of what people see on the news and the radio and stuff. They think it's this place full of crime and violence, but it's not like that. I find them one of the most welcoming and chatty people in Dublin [...] Definitely [I have experienced that stigma in DCU] because all my college friends aren't from Dublin, So I'm the only one from Dublin, and like to be from Finglas, they obviously only really hear the worst parts. So I find myself explaining that Finglas isn't that bad of a place. It's obviously you get like your rough patches, but you get your rough patches everywhere. Exactly. So I find myself like trying to justify Finglas a lot. (Clarke)

I think a lot of people from the B.Ed. program walk into the course have some perspective, but they don't really see the struggles that some of people face, particularly in disadvantaged areas. I think that's the big difference within the way [these communities] are portrayed. (Sinead)

Others, however, feel that their backgrounds are not portrayed negatively within their educational programs. They believe that everyone is treated equally regardless of where they come from, with inclusive environments that encourage collaboration and support among students.

I don't really think it's portrayed negatively. If anything, it's portrayed quite neutrally, obviously everyone comes from different backgrounds, but we're all there learning the same thing and we're all there for the same reason. (Aisling)

They treated the same. Nobody's treated differently. no matter where you come from, it's all everyone's welcome and supportive (Caitríona)

I've never experienced anyone reacting differently when I mention where I'm from. I don't think it's portrayed badly. I think it's actually good. I came in through the DCU access program, and there was a day where everyone from the access program came in together, and we all sat, I thought there were a good few of us, and it just made me feel better that I know that there are other people from other disadvantaged areas. The woman said to us, like, 'Don't ever feel like you are less than others here, put in all the work as much as they did,' and they made us just feel really good about ourselves. So that's, I think it's actually okay. (Maeve)

I don't honestly think there's any differentiation. I feel like the courses themselves are very inclusive. It doesn't really matter where you're from, you know. Okay. So, I feel like everyone is like, people from my course are from all different parts of the country. [...] I don't think that the areas are portrayed in any specific light or people from the community learning hubs

are portrayed in any particular way either. I think it's just a very inclusive environment in general. (Niall)

That is kind of what people in the B.Ed. program think of people from the community. There were 65 in my class. Most of them were from all over the country, with a good few from the Midlands and other areas. I don't think anyone looked down on anybody else. Maybe on the bigger courses where you've got 400 undergraduates, you might have a bit more. But in my class, everyone got along; everyone was fairly friendly. I don't think anyone thought less of someone from a different background. And yeah, other than the occasional joke, there were no issues like that, I don't think. (Student 4).

It's not a negative outlook; it's just different. For instance, even in my geography class during my masters program, they displayed pictures of Coolock on the screen last week. The concept was about children from the school in the area coming together to make improvements in the area. It was interesting because my friends knew that I came from a nearby area, though not specifically Coolock. I actually work in Coolock, so I do have some association with it. However, it sometimes feels like a negative portrayal. In another class, they discussed Priorswood, which is also in close proximity. They treated it as a cornerstone of the area, yet some students referred to it as a "dodgy" or non-posh area. It's interesting how certain places in Dublin are often showcased as disadvantaged areas in teaching contexts. However, it's essential to remember that every county has its disadvantaged areas. It's just a part of the learning process, and while it wasn't a negative experience, it did highlight certain perceptions. (Sorcha)

I don't like, 'cause a lot of people from the country don't really have any perceptions of these areas, except me being from an area like that's why I was coming in thinking, "Oh, my God! Are these people going to judge me for being from that area?" But they don't know the area, so they're clueless about it. And there's really no perception; everyone starts on the same level. It doesn't matter where you're from or who you are; everyone's starting fresh. [...] In college, overall at DCU, you wouldn't find many people from areas like Finglas, Ballymun, or Coolock; they may have pursued apprenticeships or PLCs. However, in the past few years, I've seen in my school and other schools that the stigma is getting less around these areas that there's more people attending college. And there's more people being really successful from these areas. Personally, I haven't experienced any stigma associated with these areas so far. (Deirdre)

4.3.2 University Benefits and Changing Perception on Localities

Overall, the consensus among the participants is that going to university offers numerous benefits. Primarily, it provides the qualifications and skills necessary for pursuing desired careers, leading to better job prospects and financial stability. University equips individuals with essential skills and provides access to valuable resources. Additionally, it offers opportunities for networking, expanding social and professional connections, and gaining diverse perspectives through interactions with peers and experts.

Well, obviously, the end goal is to get the career that you want with the qualification behind you. (Aoife)

Money, finance, lifestyle. I believe you have more opportunities to do different things if you go to university. I feel that if you don't go, you are kind of stuck in almost an everyday thing. I feel like you gain a lot more independence by coming here. [...] There's better access to jobs, obviously, and higher-paying jobs. There are benefits to being a teacher and to having a good degree. I'm sure in most places, there are a lot more benefits, like lifestyle benefits, even if you are sick or on maternity leave, or if you need some time off as a teacher. I just think there are a lot of benefits, and also, the skills that I've learned in university are something I wouldn't have learned anywhere else, in general, that way. (Niamh)

The benefits are that you're constantly upskilling your skills. You're learning about the things that are needed to become a teacher or skilled in any profession that you're going into. You also get to meet people from all around the country. (Aisling)

It just broadens your horizons, and you meet a mixture of people, providing you with different opportunities in life. (Siobhán)

I think it's about making connections with people who share similar interests. It's about gaining new opportunities... Going to university exposes you to numerous opportunities, new challenges, and ways to become a better, more rounded individual. There are opportunities to volunteer, participate in societies, engage in sports, explore new hobbies, and make new friends as well. (Niall)

While some participants have seen positive shifts in their perceptions of their localities during their time in DCU's education programmes, others find their views largely unchanged. Among those whose perspectives evolved, two became aware of socioeconomic differences among localities, while one noticed differences in language and experiences between their DCU peers and community members. Two students have grown to love and take pride in their area, feeling compelled to defend and represent it positively in college.

My views have evolved over the last three years. There are many people here who want to do well, who don't want to stay at home, unlike in my hometown where many people rely on welfare or work in retail jobs. Not many people from my area would have gone to college. I hadn't considered it much because everyone was focused on secondary school only. However, in geography at DCU, we study the poverty index, which shows where the hubs are based. It's clear that's why they're located there. Being here has definitely changed my views over the last three years. (Niamh)

My perceptions have changed a little bit over time. When I was in primary school, I never realized I was from a disadvantaged area or noticed any difference in backgrounds. Then, in secondary school, it started to change a bit. By the time I got to college, I noticed everyone else was from different areas. Because I spoke differently from most, it highlighted that I was from a disadvantaged area, not that I was embarrassed, but it did make me aware of it. (Sorcha)

I'd say I've definitely grown to love my locality more. Obviously, coming from secondary school, living in Finglas was all I knew. It wasn't anything new to me because all my friends are from similar areas. Whereas now in college, not many people are from that area. So I feel like I nearly have to advocate for it more. I have to show that I'm prouder of it than ever, I guess. It's important not to be ashamed of where you're from. (Ciara)

For those whose perspectives did not change, two participants have always been aware of the persistent socioeconomic challenges in their areas and the disparities in resources and opportunities compared to other regions. Additionally, one student spotlighted prejudices against DEIS schools and aims to educate others about the challenges and dispel associated stereotypes. Nevertheless, they now recognize the transformative impact of university education and the significance of learning hubs in raising awareness about educational and career opportunities.

I suppose local, and of, and that, felt the, also in some ways like, like I was aware of the, of the kind of poverty and the sort of deprivation and all that kind of stuff. But when you're actually hearing stories from kids that are experienced things also experience, like you carry some of a witch, like a different, like, like I had one child in a take pill that had lost his mother to suicide when he was three, and was now a seven year old kind of processing that. And there was other stories of like heroin addiction and drinks and drugs and all sorts of things like that. I suppose to like, I suppose you're aware of your whole life, but until you really say it that first time kind like experience that is a bit different. that, that sound your view a little bit. Are the people with anything. (Liam)

Like I said earlier, my views of where I'm from were just the norm for me. Being from this area was normal. Then, when I came here, it felt like I was the minority, which is fine. My locality is a DEIS area, and to me, that was always just the norm. However, I remember in a lecture, I think it was in first year of secondary school, the lecturer asked, 'What does DEIS mean to you?' They put it up on the board so everyone could type in their thoughts. The immediate responses were about disadvantaged people, less fortunate individuals, and phrases like 'people from poor areas.' The language people used didn't seem educated at all. When two different norms come together, it's quite a contrast. I think it's important to educate people about the different types of schools and their contexts, and to be more sensitive about it. My view hasn't changed; I still love my area. But I've noticed that others have prejudices when they find out you're from a DEIS school. (Roisin)

I never really had any particular perception of my locality. I suppose pupils, when they come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, sometimes have the mindset that these types of jobs aren't for them. A lot of the time, they don't feel as motivated in their education as others, and they might feel upset about not having the privileges that others do because they come from poorer areas. But I wouldn't say my perceptions have changed. I can still see that this exists in my locality. What I'd like to improve is to encourage those students and raise awareness of the ways they can get into these programs. I want them to feel more empowered and believe they can pursue highly skilled professions as well. My perception hasn't changed; I still think it's an

issue in my locality. However, I believe it's important to raise more awareness. The work that the community hubs in Kilbarack and the schools in Finglas are doing is fantastic. It's really positive what the learning hubs are doing, and it's important that they keep promoting, raising awareness, and expanding the hubs. (Niall)

4.3.3 Aspiring Careers in DEIS Schools

There is a strong expectation among many participants to pursue careers in DEIS schools, particularly in their own local communities. For 16 out of 17 participants, there is a clear desire to teach in DEIS schools, with some already having had the opportunity to do so during their placement.

Participants who expressed this aspiration often have personal connections to DEIS schools, either having attended one themselves or coming from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. They feel a deep sense of commitment and responsibility to give back to their communities by working in these schools and making a positive impact on the lives of students who face similar challenges.

Yes, I currently teach in a DEIS school. I have a passion for teaching in these schools because many of my friends come from similar disadvantaged backgrounds. Sometimes people from these areas might think they're not good enough to be teachers or that they're not equipped for it. I feel it's important for me to give back to the community where I grew up. I want to empower these children, instil self-confidence in them, and show them they can pursue any career. I'm very happy in the school I'm in now. (Niall)

I work in a DEIS school at the moment, and I definitely see kids coming from various areas. Just because their behaviour isn't perfect, like some of the other kids, doesn't mean they're any less capable. I did my placement in my old school, which is also a DEIS school. You have very difficult kids who struggle, but it's important to support them and reassure them that they can succeed. Because of my positive experiences in DEIS schools, especially in my last year of school, I would absolutely want to teach in a DEIS school. I feel that I need to give back to my community and the surrounding area by working in DEIS schools. (Deirdre)

They believe that their own experiences and backgrounds make them uniquely qualified to understand and support students in DEIS schools. They value the opportunity to work with students who come from similar backgrounds and face similar challenges, believing that this relatability enables them to better understand and empathize with their students.

I would love to teach in DEIS schools. If students see that you're like them, they feel a closer bond and look up to you more. (Maeve)

I definitely would [teach in DEIS schools]. If teachers from outside of Dublin come into DEIS schools, they often don't understand the experiences these children have at home. I feel I can relate to them, empathize with them, and understand what's going on. I think they appreciate having someone from their local area teaching them, and I would find that amazing. (Aoife)

I'd definitely like to teach in a DEIS school. Coming from my background, I've experienced a lot of disadvantages, and I'd like to help kids with similar backgrounds. I believe I can relate to kids like this. (Sinead)

Furthermore, participants appreciate the sense of community and support that DEIS schools often offer. They feel that by teaching in their own area, they can build stronger relationships with students, families, and the wider community, creating a supportive and nurturing environment for learning.

I think there's an opportunity to help people in DEIS areas more, and I'd like to do that. My research project focused on principals' perspectives on support in DEIS schools for early school leaving. I've conducted extensive research into DEIS schools and found that they often have more support available than other schools, such as home-school liaisons. I want to work with students whose families may not be as supportive, to encourage them to strive for better. I had teachers who encouraged me to excel, and I want to be that encouragement for others. Many students see DEIS schools as a safe place, and I want to be that safe haven for someone else in the future. I believe DEIS schools are more community-oriented. Even my guidance counsellor is involved in local communities and works with community hubs. It's a relaxed and supportive environment, more than just a school—it's a community. While I haven't experienced a non-DEIS school to compare, I feel DEIS schools offer a unique and positive atmosphere. I would definitely prefer to work in a DEIS school over any other. (Niamh)

I've experienced DEIS schools at both secondary and primary levels. I understand the great work that teachers do; they go out of their way. It's not just about academics. Even in DEIS schools, aspects outside academics are more important because children come from various and really different backgrounds. Their needs might be met or not, and for a child that you're with every day, you build a bond, becoming a person they can talk to about anything. I feel the needs are more pronounced in DEIS schools... In DEIS schools, I feel you can shape the child more and provide them with the time they need, whatever they're struggling with. (Orla)

Many participants have a clear expectation and desire to pursue careers in DEIS schools as teachers. They see it as a way to give back to their communities, address educational inequalities, and make a meaningful difference in the lives of students who may not have access to the same resources and support as others.

4.3.4 Enhancement of DCU Primary Teaching Programmes

Students at DCU's primary teaching program expressed a need for more support during placements, particularly in managing deadlines, paperwork, and balancing academic demands with placement responsibilities. They emphasize the lack of guidance in creating effective lesson plans and feel that the university could offer more training in academic writing and referencing. Concerns about faculty support during placements are also raised, with some students feeling left unsupported when facing placement issues or personal challenges.

Personally, I feel we could receive more support during placements, especially when it comes to managing deadlines and paperwork in our final year. Balancing the demands of a research project with placement can be very stressful and can lead to anxiety. It's challenging to focus on teaching effectively when we're not in the right state of mind. I believe there should be less paperwork during placements; the amount of paper we're wasting is excessive. It is difficult to encourage children to be mindful of the environment when we're not mindful ourselves. (Aisling)

I definitely need more support with placements. While we're instructed to write and teach lesson plans, there isn't anyone guiding us or providing support on how to create effective lesson plans. I believe there should be more focus on placement work, as well as ongoing training in academic writing and referencing. Refresh sessions, perhaps a couple of hours each semester, would be beneficial. Offering key points on academic writing and referencing would help everyone stay updated. (Deirdre)

There were situations where I felt the lecturers could have handled things better. Regarding placements, we were initially told to secure placements ourselves. When issues arose, like with Kilbarrack, the college didn't offer much help. Some might manage, but I found myself in a difficult situation, struggling with attendance at a particular school... they scheduled a week off for thesis work, which I had planned around, only to take it away. While this might seem minor to some, it added significant pressure for me. I felt that we were sometimes treated as a child rather than as adults who had already completed a degree. It's important for the university to consider the impact of such decisions on students' lives. Planning is essential, and changes can have serious consequences. During that placement, I also had personal challenges, like a hospital visit for my second baby. The additional pressure caused me to forget some paperwork, which cost me my placement and potentially my career. (Liam)

Some students mentioned that they were not adequately prepared for certain teaching aspects, such as organizational skills and parent communication.

I suppose, maybe a couple of things the course might not prepare you for are certain aspects of teaching you might not experience during the course. For instance, developing organizational skills and working with parents weren't emphasized. There was limited support on engaging with peers and working with pupils with specific needs. Additionally, communicating with parents and participating in mock parent-teacher meetings weren't covered extensively. These are important aspects of the job that we didn't learn much about in the course. While you feel equipped to educate pupils as a teacher, you sometimes don't feel fully prepared for these particular tasks. It would be beneficial to include more of this content in the course in the future. (Niall)

In terms of curriculum, while diversity and inclusion topics are appreciated, there's a desire for more comprehensive coverage throughout the course.

I feel that this year has been particularly good in terms of content; it's actually been my favourite year. We've had numerous lectures on topics like

racism, global issues, and prejudice, which I find very valuable. Being educated on these subjects is important, and I've genuinely enjoyed the content this year. Additionally, one of our modules featured guest speakers, which I found to be quite interesting. To improve support, I believe there should be more diversity in the topics covered and everyone should be educated on these important issues. (Roisin)

Financial challenges are significant, with students struggling to cover expenses due to limited funding options. They call for increased financial support, especially for resources like printing and transportation.

I believe we could receive more financial support, considering the amount I spend on resources and printing. The grant from Susi only goes so far; we receive 156 euros per month. Neither of my parents work, so it's solely up to me to manage financially. I'm at the university five days a week from 10 to 6, which makes it challenging to find a traditional job. The financial aspect is really tough, and even bus fares for commuting to and from placement on Mondays add to the burden. (Sinead)

funding really... money is one of the problems getting in college and out college. And then when you're on placement like there should be a placement fund because you spend so much money on resources like ink and paper and crafts of that think that'd be main thing that like would help us for. (Áine)

Emotional and academic support are also considered essential. Students value regular check-ins with faculty or mentors to voice concerns and seek advice.

When I started, I thought I'd find it manageable because I had wanted to pursue this for a long time and felt I knew quite a bit about it. However, I found the workload overwhelming, especially with the amount of work required for assignments. Someone arranged a meeting with us to discuss our concerns, which was very reassuring. She shared information about the course that we might not have been aware of, and it really helped put me at ease. I think these check-ins, whether with her or anyone else, are really beneficial throughout the year. (Maeve)

Encouragement remains my primary need. I recently spoke with [Hub Coordinator], and she mentioned that I could still join the Irish class if needed. Learning is ongoing, and there's always something new to learn. Financial support is important too, but it's not feasible for many students. Support and encouragement, along with access to classes, would be my main form of support. Knowing that help is available and accessible makes a huge difference. (Sorcha)

There is a need for clearer and more frequent communication regarding course requirements and admission criteria.

I could say that from my experience, teaching at DCU doesn't have to be limited to primary education. I reached out to the guidance counsellor or the career advisor here. Only a few months ago, I realized that for the Masters of Education program here, my second-year results are compared to others'. I probably would've performed better if I had known this, as I had thought it was mostly based on my third year. However, it turns out you're actually

compared based on your second-year results. While your third-year performance still matters, I wasn't aware of this comparison earlier. I feel that if this information had been communicated to me sooner, it would've been helpful. They did organize a session for final year students this year about applying for primary or secondary school masters, which I attended. But I wish they had offered this information a year earlier, as planning is essential. It was beneficial to attend, but I wish I had known this last year."
(Niamh)

Transitioning to online learning has posed challenges for some students. They suggest offering training sessions on effective online learning strategies and providing resources for managing online platforms like Zoom.

Most of the support I needed was due to the way the course was delivered, mainly through Zoom. It was a completely different experience compared to my undergraduate studies at UCD, which were in-person. Normally, after a lecture, you might discuss with friends or clarify doubts while grabbing coffee. With Zoom, once the lecture ended, you were on your own. If you missed something or needed clarification, there wasn't an immediate opportunity. While they encouraged questions at the end, often I only realized my questions half an hour later. (Liam)

Lastly, students feel that the program lacks opportunities for building relationships with peers due to frequent changes in module groups. They express a desire for more consistent groupings to foster friendships and collaborative learning.

Like more opportunities like to meet people and like have time to actually talk to the same people. Like the modules are changed around you, like with different people every single time. There's no way you'd like to speak with them or like even have that kind of friendship or relationship with people. (Aoife).

4.3.5 Recommendations to Future Aspirants

Participants provided recommendations to future aspirants based on their experiences and insights into the teaching profession. Their advice covers various aspects of preparing for and utilize teaching hubs for guidance and support.

Definitely focus on your Irish and stuff like that. Stay on top of it and attend one of the hubs for help. Otherwise, you wouldn't get the grade. (Aoife)

Go to the hubs. Make sure to attend all the classes and keep up with everything. (Caitríona)

If they want to become a primary school teacher, I'd advise them to study as much as they can. Put in the effort in the subjects that are needed and ask for support when needed. Don't try to do it all yourself. There's a community around you to help as much as possible. I'd also advise them to get in contact with the hubs. Maybe speak to other people who have become teachers and have gone through the process to understand what is needed. Just ask the community around you for support when needed. (Aisling)

First of all, I'd say to someone who didn't achieve the required Leaving Cert entry requirements not to stop trying, because there's a pathway into everything... Also, don't let the fact that you're from a disadvantaged area or financial reasons stop you from trying to get somewhere. I've received a lot of help from various people... Financially, there's help available everywhere. If you're not confident, there are friends, classes, and help available to you. So, don't limit yourself. Don't let age or financial reasons hold you back, because you can achieve your goals. (Sorcha)

In essence, participants consider that the hubs serve as valuable resources for aspiring teachers, providing them with educational support, guidance, and a community of experienced professionals and peers to connect with. Participants encourage to seek and utilize the teaching hubs as a resource for classes, guidance, and support. Speak to experienced teachers or those who have gone through the process to gain insights and advice. Keep up with classes and ensure you are meeting all the requirements and expectations for becoming a teacher. If financial constraints are a concern, know that there may be assistance available through these hubs or other community resources.

Participants also acknowledge that challenges are inevitable in any career, but they believe that resilience and determination are important in their journey.

I would tell her not to walk out and just keep working hard. Don't let anyone tell you that you won't be able to do it, or that it's too many points, or question why you're from Finglas and going to college. Just focus on yourself, keep an open mind, and stick to your goals. Don't let others' opinions sway you or change your mind about anything." (Deirdre)

Just go for it. Don't be afraid. It's a fantastic job and I don't know one teacher that says I regret becoming a teacher or one teacher that's changed career. I said, I think once you're in a job you just fall in love with it straight away. I said it's a really nice job and it's one of the only jobs where, you know, you can see the difference that you're making and you're making a really positive impact. You have a really great opportunity to make a huge impact on a child's legacy could be changing a child from being shy inward, like, you know, not confident to a self-confident, empowered individual who's able to, you know, express themselves and they feel, they feel the sort of straightened confidence to take on new challenges. (Niall)

Other advice include to start early by researching the teaching profession and understanding its demands.

Do your research early. Don't do your research in fifth or sixth year. Do it in third or fourth year before you've made any decisions that'll affect your future. I know that's a bit early to reside and if you want to do a teacher, but if, even if it's in the back of your head, oh, well I wouldn't mind doing that. Like you don't have to be set on that. But I think if someone had to tell me are you even interested in PE teaching, I would've said, yeah, I'm a bit interested. And they'd say, right, definitely do a science subject then, you know, that way I feel like I definitely tell them to do your research early because people think, oh, you make all these decisions in six-year notes, it's too late then, you know (Niamh)

Lastly, participants consider that passion and dedication are necessary in the teaching profession.

I'd tell them that they have to really, really want to do it. Like you have to love it to do it. Like the amount of work involved is crazy. It's not at all what I expected, but if you didn't love it, you wouldn't enjoy it. So, I'd tell them that they really have to want to become a teacher in order to be a teacher (Sinead)

I'd probably tell them that they have to be motivated enough that it is a hard course to do and that you really have to want to be a teacher to be in this course [...] and that they have to love children as well at the same time". (Maeve)

5 Conclusions

This examination of the motivations of working class students to become primary teachers in the Coolock, Darndale, Kilbarrack and Finglas areas of Dublin took place in the context of investigating their experiences of the HEA funded local community outreach hubs established by DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre, in conjunction with Northside Area Partnership and Dublin North West Partnership. While the figures for those gaining entry to primary teaching and engaging in classes with the hubs highlighted at the outset of the Report point to the significant success of the hubs in helping to notably increase access to primary teaching in DCU and to foster aspirations towards a career in teaching, the 17 interviews undertaken with former hubs students who gained entry to DCU primary teaching courses have highlighted a number of notable themes.

These key themes are as follows:

Desire to teach in DEIS schools in future: It is particularly noticeable that for 16 out of 17 interviewees, there is a clear desire to teach in DEIS schools, with some already having had the opportunity to do so during their placement.

Participants who expressed this aspiration often have personal connections to DEIS schools, either having attended one themselves or coming from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. They feel a deep sense of commitment and responsibility to give back to their communities by working in these schools and making a positive impact on the lives of students who face similar challenges.

Early Development for Many Students of Aspiration to Become a Teacher

While the aspiration ages show significant variation, nevertheless, the majority of participants expressed their desire to become teachers during their primary school years, between the ages of 5 and 11. At least 11 out of 17 participants first considered the idea of becoming educators during this period. However, for some, the inclination toward teaching emerged later during their secondary school years, around the ages of 14 or 15, or even later, with aspirations appearing in their twenties or even as late as their thirties.

When it comes to making a firm decision to become a teacher, the majority—13 out of 17 students—made their decisions during their secondary school years, between the ages of 12 and 17. For many, this decision-making process was encouraged by discussions in school about career choices. It is to be noted that early development of career aspirations in general tends to occur already at primary school age, as international research highlights that career aspirations tend to be set at the age of seven and change relatively little between then and 18 years (OECD 2018).

Building on Positive School Experiences to Foster Aspirations to Become a Teacher

As well as due to family influences, experiences during primary and secondary school play a crucial role in shaping students' aspirations towards teaching. At least 8 out of 17 students mentioned that positive interactions with teachers, engaging classroom environments, and meaningful learning experiences influenced them to consider teaching as a career path. They want to be the kind of teacher who inspired them and made them look forward to going to school

4 students mentioned negative experiences in their own schooling and aim to create a more positive school environment for others.

Wider Role of the Hubs in Supporting Access to Third Level Education for Other Subjects than Teaching

Though the hubs were funded initially with the main purpose to promote access to teaching profession within the Institute of Education at DCU, the hubs currently provide service to all student interested in pursuing a career in teaching or in accessing higher education. However, the main focus remains in helping students to get access to teaching profession and widening the representation of those of underrepresented communities.

Multidimensional Positive Impacts of the Hubs

The hubs offer accessible and inclusive academic support through classes in key subjects, while also providing personalised guidance and mentorship to students. This includes assistance with college applications, understanding admission requirements, and organizing necessary documents, ensuring that students are well-informed and prepared when applying to colleges or universities.

Students appreciate the personalised support, inclusive learning environment, and the comprehensive range of services, from academic assistance to emotional and social support. They find the hubs beneficial in preparing them for a career in teaching. The hubs have successfully created a space where students feel valued, understood, and empowered

The impact of the Learning Hubs extends beyond academic support to include emotional and social support. This support can be crucial in building students' confidence and sense of belonging.

Mentoring Role of Hubs Coordinators

Students highlighted the importance of the hubs in providing motivation during challenging times, such as exam preparation or uncertainty about their future pathways. The hub coordinators emerged as key figures in this support system, offering personalized guidance, references, and support beyond academic assistance. They helped students explore alternative pathways into their desired fields, arranged shadowing days, and provided opportunities for practical experiences, such as visits to relevant campuses.

The Need for Further Promotion of Teaching as a Career in Local Areas and for a Focus of the Hubs on Primary School Pupils

In the effort to promote primary and post-primary teaching within the local areas, students have put forth three main suggestions:

1. Increase awareness and information about teaching profession.
2. Offer support for Irish language and expand access to free grinds or extra tuition for essential subjects.
3. Enhance visibility and accessibility of learning hubs.

While the hubs have achieved considerable success, they also recognize the need for continuous improvement. Feedback from participants and staff is actively sought to identify areas for enhancement. This commitment to continuous improvement ensures that the hubs remain relevant and effective in meeting the evolving needs of students and the broader educational community.

The hubs have played a role in increasing awareness of teaching profession. Many potential applicants from underrepresented areas may not be aware of the opportunities available at DCU's Institute of Education or of the benefits of becoming a teacher, resulting in fewer applications. The hubs engage in proactive outreach efforts to raise awareness about higher education opportunities and the support available through the hubs. They work closely with schools, teachers, and community organizations to reach students who may not otherwise consider pursuing higher education due to financial, academic, or social barriers. However,

areas that need attention include expanding outreach efforts to reach more students and **reaching them in primary school, and providing more comprehensive support services for younger students**, such as through arts-based learning, leadership and public speaking activities.

Expansion of Spatial Capacity to Meet Increasing Need and Interest in the Hubs

As the number of participants are increasing, there is also need to expand in terms of space and support provided, but additional funding for that would be necessary.

The Need for PostEntry Ongoing Supports for Hubs Students Undertaking Primary Teaching and to Raise Prevention of Social Class Stereotyping Awareness in Academic Staff

Another recommendation is to provide ongoing support and check-ins with former hub participants to see how they are progressing in the B.Ed. or PME and if they need any additional assistance. Interviewees raise the issue of social class stereotyping of local areas by some university lecturers. This highlights the need for prevention of such social class stereotyping through raising awareness of academic staff of this issue.

Financial Barriers

Obstacles experienced by participants, participant's friends and other people in local area when attempting to become primary teachers include socioeconomic factors that intersect with educational pathways, and institutional processes. Two areas highlighted by interviewees were costs of school placement, with a school placement fund suggested to alleviate these additional costs for working class students. Similarly, financial barriers hindering social interaction after lectures was also highlighted.

As well as the difficulty of the high points requirements for primary teaching at DCU, inviting the need for consideration of **further embedding flexible entry routes to primary teaching** in DCU, a key obstacle identified is **Challenges in Meeting the Irish Language Requirements** as 10 out of 17 mentioned the barriers faced by their friends were proficiency in the Irish language.

A further obstacle identified is **Length and complexity of the pathway to primary teaching**. The narrative of Sorcha illustrates the lengthy timeline involved in attaining the necessary qualifications, including PLC, bachelor's, and master's degrees, alongside requisite examinations such as the Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (TEG) exam. Another student described the process a "convoluted" sequence of steps, from submitting written applications to undergoing interviews, each marked by prolonged waiting periods.

Another prevalent theme is the presence of **psychological and socio-cultural barriers** that prevent individuals from pursuing a teaching career. Psychological barriers include self-doubt, fear of academic challenges, and a lack of confidence in one's abilities. The hubs have directly sought to address these barriers to foster aspirations towards teaching.

Impact and Future Directions

In summary, the DCU's Local Community Outreach Learning Hubs, in conjunction with Northside Area Partnership and Dublin North West Partnership have made a profound impact on the educational journey of students from underrepresented local communities. They have **contributed to increased access, enhanced social class diversity, and fostered a strong sense of community and networking among students, educators and mentors**.

Looking ahead, there is **a clear need for continued support and potential expansion of the hubs to other areas of North Dublin through increased funding and resources. It is recommended that the HEA explore synergies with other third level institutions to establish similar such hubs.** They may also help support **ethnic diversity in the teaching profession with a stronger focus on flexible entry pathways for ethnically diverse groups.**

The findings of this Report need to be situated against the backdrop of the recruitment and retention crisis of teachers in the Irish system, in recent years, identified by the OECD DEIS Review 2024 as disproportionately impacting on DEIS schools. While this crisis of both recruitment and retention is a multidimensional one, related centrally to the housing crisis in Dublin and nationally, it is to be accentuated that **almost all of the interviewed hubs students gave a positive commitment regarding their interest in teaching in DEIS schools in future.** This offers a strategic basis for these hubs and future expanded hubs to be a notable element in a wider national strategy for DEIS schools, one focusing both on access to diversify the teaching profession and **one recognising this as an issue of teacher supply and retention, namely, that increasing student teachers from DEIS schools can help foster a cohort with demonstrable commitment** as well as cultural competence (Downes 2015) **in working in DEIS schools and with working class communities.** As many teachers in Ireland eventually go back to live in communities they grew up in, this factor is of relevance for a teacher supply model for DEIS schools in future that is a sustainable one.

Given the notable finding that **a majority of interviewees first considered the idea of becoming educators already in primary school, there is a need for a more explicit, systemic and structured focus on consideration of future careers by teachers in classroom discussions at primary school level in DEIS school contexts.** Primary school age is already a key developmental phase for fostering future career aspirations towards becoming a teacher, for many student teachers gaining entry to primary teaching through the hubs.

While the hubs have been promoted on local radio and in local newspapers, as well as in many other ways, there is scope for further increase of the profile of the hubs in local areas, as stated by a number of the interviewees.

There is opportunity to expand the goals of the hubs beyond primary teaching and teaching more generally, **to include a focus on other distinctive courses in DCU, particularly those where the benefits to society of a diverse student and professional body are evident.** The hubs can be envisaged as an initial step towards the development of local community lifelong learning centres and the HEA may consider its own future strategic role in encouraging third level institutions to establish such local community outreach lifelong learning centres to promote access to targeted courses in third level education, courses including but by no means limited to those for primary and secondary teaching.

Resonant with Goal 3: Clarity of the current HEA National Access Plan,

- a. To ensure greater coordination and consistency of pre-entry and mentoring work across HEIs. To establish a working group across the higher education system involving stakeholder and community partner consultation to consider a coherent approach to preentry and mentoring.

increased funding from the HEA is recommended across North Dublin and nationally to build on and expand such local community outreach spaces as hubs to further promote access to the teaching profession for working class communities.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to explore three different key moments: the early stage of individuals when they decided to become a primary/post-primary teacher; their participation in one of the community learning hubs (e.g., Finglas, Darndale-Coolock or Kilbarrack) and their experience of transitioning and studying DCU Bachelor of Education course.

Early stage: becoming a teacher

1. Could you tell me about when and how did you decide to become a primary post-primary teacher? (Main influences on decision-making: family, friends, teachers, personal experience or media).
2. At what age did you think you might wish to be a teacher?
3. At what age did you firmly decide you wanted to be a primary teacher?
4. What are the main reasons you want to be a primary teacher?
5. What obstacles, if any, did you experience to becoming a primary teacher?
6. What obstacles, if any, did/do your friends experience to becoming a primary teacher?
7. What are the attitudes and perceptions about becoming primary/post-primary teacher in your local area?
8. What is the biggest barrier to becoming a primary teacher in your local area?
9. Who helped keep you motivated to study, if anyone?
10. What can schools do more in your area to promote primary teaching?
11. What additional supports are needed to increase access to the teaching profession for young people in your local area and school?

Participation in the HUBS

12. What hub (Finglas, Darndale-Coolock and Kilbarrack) did you participate in?
13. How did you find about this hub and why did you decide to participate in this hub?
14. What were the main ways, if any, that the (Finglas, Darndale-Coolock or Kilbarrack) hubs helped you on your path to studying primary teaching?
15. What is the biggest improvement needed for the hubs?
16. How can we continue to support yourself and other students coming into teacher education via the hubs?
17. How can the hubs help young people in the future to gain access to study for primary teaching?

Career and Expectations

18. Could you tell me about your experience of the DCU Bachelor of Education course?

19. What is your sense of the culture of DCU's St Patrick's Campus / All Hallow Campus compared to your locality?
20. What is your sense of DCU's St Patrick's Campus as a place?
21. How have you experienced the place of and places within DCU St Patrick's / All Hallows?
22. Would you like to teach in a DEIS school in your own area in the future? Why/why not?
23. How do you think your locality / community (or other places with similar hubs) are portrayed on the B.Ed. programme?
24. How can you be supported more while now in DCU primary teaching?
25. How have your views of your locality evolved over your time on the B.Ed programme, if at all?
26. If your younger brother or sister wanted to become a teacher, what advice would you give him/her?
27. What are the benefits in your opinion of going to university?

Appendix B

Embedding of the hubs with regard to the 2015-19 National Access Plan.

This project proposal builds on National Access Plan 2015-19, Goal 5: To develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular focus on mentoring. It is pertinent to the additional dimensions of indicators in the National Access plan regarding:

- Entry to higher education from students who have attended DEIS schools.
- Students in receipt of the special rate of grant
- Data based on postcodes (p.37)

As the HEA strategy states, ‘Among and across the national target groups there are also subgroups that experience difficulties participating in higher education and who require particular support – these include lone parents, teen parents and some people from ethnic minorities’ (p.15). The HEA strategy also states, ‘There is potential for increasing higher education attainment among the wider adult population and the rate of participation of mature students in higher education has increased’ (p.14). See also the HEA consultation paper for the 2015-19 Strategy that recognises ‘The role of the community and community-based programmes and initiatives needs to be considered afresh in terms of further developing our understanding of how these are contributing to increased access by under-represented groups.’ (p.15).

This project additionally builds especially on the following key guiding principles that inform that National Access Plan 2015-19:

‘i. Equity of access policies must span the entire education spectrum and take a ‘whole of education’ approach to social inclusion.

ii. Strengthening relationships and communication between families, schools and higher education institutions is key to supporting student aspiration, engagement and achievement.

v. Fostering partnerships between key stakeholders is critical to articulating the value and benefits of higher education and building social capital in communities with low levels of participation’ (p.16).

v. Fostering partnerships between key stakeholders is critical to articulating the value and benefits of higher education and building social capital in communities with low levels of participation

‘Teachers, higher education staff, guidance counsellors and mentors already play an important role in communicating the benefits and value of higher education to those in second level and further and adult education. For those who are currently outside formal education, however, it can be difficult to access clear, comprehensive information on the range of options and supports that are available and this is an issue that we need to address’ (p.19). The Outreach Hubs as steps towards community outreach lifelong learning centres serves a key purpose of providing such a bridge in a welcoming and familiar local environment – including to explore ranges of options for pursuing teaching, gaining cultural confidence to do so, as well as educational supports to help equip potential applicants for teaching.

The HEA strategy emphasises that:

Initiatives or strategies that emerge from such engagements should have some or all of the following elements or characteristics.

- A ‘whole-of-education’ approach to access.
- Communication of the value of higher education.
- Provision of clear information on education pathways.
- Reinforcement of HEIs’ engagement with communities and other stakeholders.
- The use of mentors/role models from within communities – to enable students to make informed decisions about their post-secondary education options.
- Involvement of parents and teachers as key advisers to students. (p.31)

