

UL Engage Reports

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Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills (CWELL) Evaluation Report 2022

Lindsey Liston



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Leadership and Lifeskills (CWELL)
Evaluation Report 2022

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ABSTRACT



The Community Wellness Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills (CWELL) programme is an accredited community-university partnership programme designed to achieve specific outcomes in health literacy, the acquisition and application of knowledge to practice, and in personal and professional development of participants, particularly in the areas of leading and sustaining positive change in marginalised communities. The CWELL programme is firmly situated within the engaged tradition of research and practice. The philosophy underpinning CWELL is to *engage with local communities*, supporting them to identify and advance projects that matter to them, making the most of community involvement in the process. This is in contrast to approaches that *impose solutions on* marginalised communities without their involvement. Special attention is given by CWELL to the partnership design, philosophy, governance structure, and innovative community-orientated pedagogical approaches utilised. This report presents the results of a programme evaluation that took place from June 2022 to August 2022, using focus groups and interviews to capture the experiences of CWELL students and community partners to gain a better understanding of the impact of this programme from the perspectives of former and current students and local community partners.

About the Author



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Lindsey is a passionate researcher and practitioner, mobilising a critical sociological lens, with 10+ years of experience in the tradition of engaged practice and research with marginalised, excluded and minoritized communities with a particular focus on the intersection of class, social and educational exclusion, crime and involvement with the criminal justice system.

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INTRODUCTION

The Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills (CWELL) diploma represents a unique collaboration between community agencies and the University of Limerick. CWELL's model is one of 'engaged communities' that proactively address community-identified health and wellbeing needs through a partnership approach that enhances existing strengths, fosters community resilience and leadership, and contributes toward improved quality of life and the development of healthy communities.

The CWELL diploma is co-designed with local communities in order to address specific needs that are identified by the local community and UL staff as it relates to:

- ◆ Physical and mental health and wellbeing
- ◆ Personal development and skills acquisition
- ◆ The application of local knowledge to development practice and;
- ◆ Leading and sustaining change positive change in local communities.

The programme was originally developed in a partnership between St Mary's Parish and staff from Faculty of Education and Health Sciences. Following an evaluation of the pilot programme 2014-to-2016; in 2018, the programme was expanded across the city and moved to the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. CWELL is innovative in terms of its collaborative co-design, philosophy and governance structures, as well as the community-oriented teaching approaches it deploys.

Embedded in programme ethos are mutual and respectful partnerships, collaborative decision-making and community-driven engaged research and practice.

CWELL PROGRAMME STRUCTURE: Year one

AUTUMN	SPRING
CW4001: Well-Being Across the Lifespan	GM3001: Managing Health in the home and in the Community
CW4011: Personal Development	CW4002: Empowerment and Lifeskills

CWELL PROGRAMME STRUCTURE: Year two

AUTUMN	SPRING
CW4003: Active Living	CW4004: Leading and Sustaining Change in the Community
UP4101: Practicum I	UP4102: Practicum II

PROGRAMME REVISION 2018

The CWELL programme was originally created in the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences (EHS) and led by staff from the Department of Nursing and Midwifery, with contributions from other EHS academic departments. The demands of programme extension proved too onerous for the EHS faculty and—rather than lose the programme—it was transferred to the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS), where the Department of Politics and Public Administration took responsibility for its provision.

Representatives from each of the areas that Limerick Council wished to include in the programme were selected by the NGO programme sponsor, Limerick City Development Project, to review the programme. The outcome was a programme that focused less exclusively on personal and mental health, and was broadened out to include a more holistic view of well-being that included physical fitness (Active Living) and community advocacy (Empowerment and Lifeskills).

The distribution of credits was more evenly spread across the modules (see table 1 below) and all modules were given a generic CWELL identification code (so that their provision was not tied to any single academic department), enabling a greater variety of university divisions and departments to participate in CWELL.

Table 1. original CWELL modules in black, revised modules in blue

Autumn	Spring
Mental health 1 – well-being and positive mental health across the lifespan (18ECTS)	Managing Health in the Home and Community (18ECTS)
Well-being across the lifespan 15ECTS [Eist Counselling]	Managing Health in the Home and Community 18ECTS [GEMS]
Study Skills and Personal Development (12 ECTS)	Communication and Life-skills (12ECTS)
Personal Development (15ECTS) [Education]	Empowerment and Life skills (12 ECTS)
Mental Health 2 – Management of mental health (18ECTS)	Leading and Sustaining Change in the Community (18ECTS)
Active Living (15ECTS) [UL sport]	Leading and Sustaining Change in the Community (15ECTS)
UL Practicum 1 (12ECTS)	UL Practicum 2 (12ECTS)
UL Practicum 1 (15ECTS) [MA Engaged Research programme]	UL Practicum 2 (15ECTS) [MA Engaged Research programme]

CWELL THEORY OF CHANGE

The CWELL theory of change is based on the assumption that meaningful community-university partnerships, co-design, community-based education and engaged research will positively contribute to addressing social issues in a way that empowers course participants to effect changes in well-being and lifestyles within their local communities.

CWELL aims to proactively address community-identified health and wellbeing needs through a partnership approach that enhances existing strengths, fosters community resilience and leadership, and contributes toward improved quality of life and the development of healthy communities. The objectives of CWELL are to provide:

- ⇒ A mechanism to strengthen local communities by enabling and supporting course participants' engagement with local communities through the development of projects in the area of health and well-being.
- ⇒ A supportive structure within which to respond to identified community needs with content that addresses physical and mental health and personal and professional development
- ⇒ An approach to learning that empowers course participants to effect positive change in their well-being and lifestyles within their communities.

These are achieved through the provision of an accredited pathway to further education, an accredited first-aid course and a flexible model of delivery, over two years (full-time) or four years (part-time).



Figure 1. The CWELL Theory of Change

CWELL AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of the CWELL programme is to proactively address community health and well-being in a way that enables the building of healthy partnerships to enhance existing strengths, foster community resilience and leadership, and contribute towards improved quality of life and the creation of healthy and sustainable communities.

The programme is intended to provide the following:

- A means to strengthen local communities by enabling and supporting course participants' engagement with the community and promoting social inclusion through developing local projects in the area of health and well-being.
- A supported structure within which to respond to identified community needs with content that addresses physical and mental health and personal and professional development
- An approach to learning that empowers course participants to effect positive change in their well-being and lifestyles within their own community.
- The means to build leadership capacity within the community.
- An accredited first-aid course.
- An accredited pathway for further education.
- A flexible mode of delivery, over two years (full-time) or four years (part-time).

In addition to the direct programme objectives, the CWELL programme is intended to contribute to wider strategic intentions for the development of University-Community engagement. These are reflected in the **University of Limerick's Strategic Plan 2019-2024**, which identifies impact on 'the City and Region' as one of its five key goals; and also in the **Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan 2013-2024** (LRFIP), which includes supporting access to education and training, improving quality of life, closing gaps in health and wellbeing, building local leadership capacity and supporting civic engagement in local communities among its key objectives for Limerick Regeneration areas.

This evaluation report is intended to evidence the extent to which the CWELL programme responds to these aims and, where appropriate, identify opportunities for improvement and development.

The report begins with an explication of the research design for this evaluation with details concerning ethical protocols, participant selection and the use of thematic analysis. The main body of the report gives consideration to:

- ◇ programme content and delivery;
- ◇ the impact and outcome of CWELL for students;
- ◇ the impact and outcome of CWELL for wider strategic ambitions between the city and the university;
- ◇ report conclusions
- ◇ summary recommendations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation is formative and supports ongoing improvement and implementation of learnings. Reflecting the participatory and collaborative philosophy underpinning the CWELL programme, and the evidence that highlights how community members, especially those from groups and communities that are considered disadvantaged, rarely have a say in the agendas and priorities of projects that aim to support them (Pratt 2019), this evaluation utilised a qualitative approach. Recognising that ‘voice is the tool by which we make ourselves known, name our experience, and participate in decisions that affect our lives’ (Nagle, 2001), data were collected using focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

ETHICAL REVIEW

The evaluation protocol was submitted to the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at UL for Ethical Review. The application was submitted on the 8th of June 2022 and approved on June 23rd 2022. The fieldwork did not include vulnerable adults or young people under the age of 18 years.

INFORMED CONSENT

Verbal and written consent was obtained from the participants before data collection. This consisted of detailed information outlining the purpose of the research, confidentiality, anonymity, and how the data would be used. Participants were also informed of their right to decline to take part in the study and/or to withdraw from it at will. Details of whom to contact in the event a participant had any concerns or questions about the research were also provided. Signed consent sheets were issued to each participant and the principal investigator (PI) went through a research privacy notice with each of them. Permissions were sought to record the interviews. All names or personal details given throughout the interviews and focus groups were omitted from the transcripts.

PARTICIPANTS

Because the purpose of the evaluation was to determine if, how and to what extent the CWELL programme was meeting the stated aims and objectives of the project, a purposive sampling approach was used to order to recruit participants. Gatekeepers were used to identify participants who fitted the criteria for participation. Invitations to participate, together with detailed information sheets were issued to all past and present CWELL students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

They were also sent to key community partners. Several time slots and days were offered and participants choose the one that suited them. The focus groups and interviews were conducted via zoom and were recorded. The data was transcribed using otter.ai and rechecked manually for accuracy. In total 24 people opted to participate in the evaluation. This comprised of current and former CWELL students broken down as follows:

Students:

Sector:	Position:	Number of Participants:
Enterprise and Development	CEO	1
Community Services	CEO	1
Family Support and Community Development	Manager	1
Adult and Community Education	Co-ordinator	1
School	Principal	1
Local Authority	Service Co-ordinator	1

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and was approached through the lens of the stated aims and objectives of CWELL as outlined above.

PROGRAMME CONTENT & DELIVERY

AUTUMN SEMESTER YEAR ONE

Personal Development

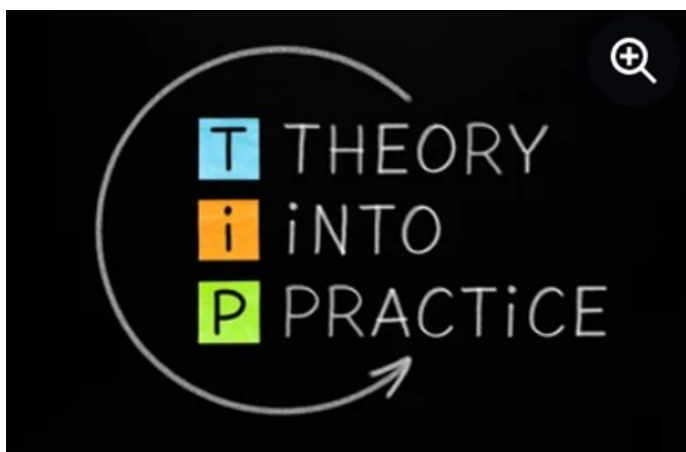
Well-Being Across the Lifespan



SPRING SEMESTER YEAR ONE

Managing Health in the Home and Community

Empowerment and Lifeskills



AUTUMN SEMESTER YEAR TWO

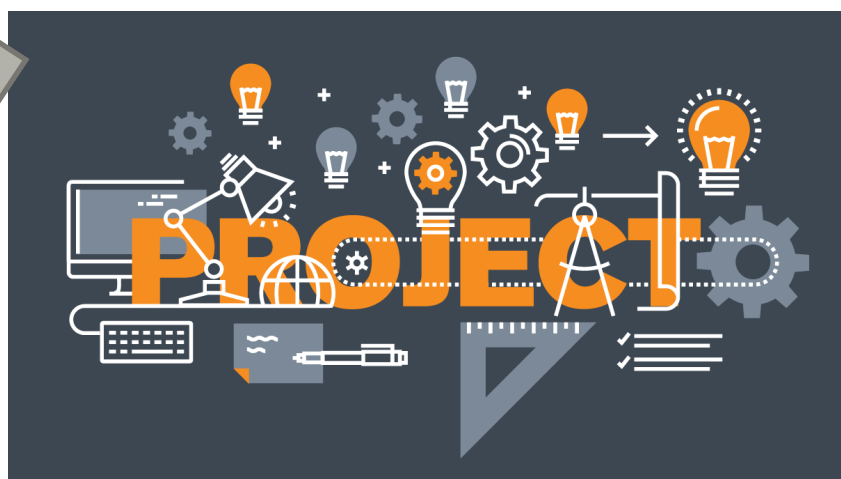
Active Living

Practicum I—project co-design and planning

SPRING SEMESTER YEAR TWO

Leading and Sustaining Community Change

Practicum Project 2—delivery and impact



CWELL CURRICULUM

Meyer (2014) noted that within educational institutions non-traditional students often enter into learning environments that are not designed to accommodate them. The implications of which are non-completion of studies, dissatisfaction with the experience and feelings of isolation. However, CWELL students described the opposite of this. The data from this evaluation reinforced the findings (Adshead, 2016) of previous evaluations as it related to the inventive curriculum design and content that is embedded in communities. As active participants who “co-create knowledge for change.” (CWELL Student) CWELL students described the learning environment and curriculum design as for them, created with them and as a consequence they experienced it as “life-changing” and “mind-blowing”...

“I don't say this lightly but it changed my life.” (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

“It literally changed my entire life for the better.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

“It literally blew my mind.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

Notwithstanding the acknowledged successes of the CWELL programme, respondents to this review highlighted areas for further development and/or improvement in the programme, concerning: module content; module scheduling; and the provision of programme supports.

MODULE CONTENT

In terms of curriculum content, all of the student participants identified the personal development module as an extremely important one. On the one hand, students reported reaping immense benefits from the module. On the other hand, students also reported the module as being ‘overly therapeutically orientated’ which left them feeling vulnerable.

“It was very heavy at the start. I didn't think I wanted to be there and that's being honest with you. It was a bit too heavy.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

Whilst the situated curriculum content and design were positively received, there were particular issues with the module on ‘well-being across the lifespan’. Some students viewed the content as constituting ‘counselling’ and being overly therapeutically orientated. This led to feelings of ‘vulnerability’ and ‘opening a can of worms without putting it back in’.

“It really made me feel vulnerable.” (CWELL Student—Class of 19-22)

CWELL CURRICULUM

"I'm very sensitive to other people so when we were all in this group of people we didn't know very well and then we share all these things and I went home with all that." (CWELL Student—Class of 19-22)

In this context, it was suggested that it would be more appropriate for the personal development module to focus on 'professional boundaries, how to work with conflict within communities, and how to work within groups'. Where additional therapeutic supports were needed it was suggested that students be signposted to community services or the university counselling service as opposed to dealing with such issues within the classroom. However, the reflective journal aspect of the personal development module was deemed highly beneficial by all students.

Others identified additions to the current curriculum content that they felt would be important

"If I could do a module for grant applications and how communities are run through grants. I would love to be able to do it, you know." (CWELL Student)

"You know what would be fantastic and this is coming from someone that's in the office in a community centre? is a grant writing application workshop." (CWELL Student)

"We looked at what grants are available but you need to write them and know what the buzz words that are needed and there are buzz words. It's what they look out for." (CWELL Student)

Community partners suggested that a module on social entrepreneurship could be an important addition to the curriculum

"The whole area of social entrepreneurship the idea of how the Kemmy business school can be linked into CWELL because the projects over the last number of years the students were talking about, were actually projects that they were hoping to go into employment with." (Community Partner)

CWELL CURRICULUM

MODULE SCHEDULING

Whilst the students acknowledged that there can be factors that impact on the timetabling of specific modules that were beyond the control of the CWELL course director, they did highlight the importance of continuity between the module being taught at a given time and the projects and assignments that are being undertaken. Aligning module content with project progression sometimes resulted in students doing classwork on topics that they already had submitted their assignments for.

“The project work module. I would have liked to have that before we done our project work because she was teaching us how to do the project work in the midst of us doing our project work. That was definitely at the wrong end. Just the organisation of it. There wasn't a kind of a natural flow.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

“Consistency is the word. [There was] a lack of consistency in the modules.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

Students also identified tutor feedback as an important area for improvement to enhance learning.

“You were told that you could get feedback but there was no feedback. And that is important, particularly for mature students. We are not as quick as the young ones so just a bit of feedback to let us know if we're on the right path before you hand something in.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

“We were looking for all feedback positive and negative because unless you get feedback you can't make something better.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

“There was a lack of feedback from tutors. it's just that you're asking for feedback on stuff you sent in, and you might get it after you have the assessment done, you know which I thought if you got it in kind of midway through, it might give you a better idea of where you're going and what you need to maybe improve.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

More generally, students were attracted by the “community focus” of the course curriculum and the opportunity to acquire skills that would enable them to **“make a difference in our communities and we were doing it for that reason”**(CWELL Student—Class of 20-22).

“To help people to just make things better, you know, to help our community to help our children.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

CWELL COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Community Partners noted that CWELL is different from other university offerings and forms of community engagement because of the way that the curriculum integrates community based expertise with academic expertise.

“With CWELL you have got practitioners on the ground, like Maura, like Eileen who is driving this forward on the ground. And that’s the difference. It’s quite community-focused, based on engagement with the communities, not in the ivory towers of UL or other academic institutions. It’s happening on the ground and that’s where the answers lie. You know, that’s where the solution is really, in real engagement with the community creating mechanisms for the community’s needs to be addressed through the CWELL programme.”

(Community Partner)

“You got that practical, solution-focused practitioner, married with somebody who has the academic rigour, but also has the interest and the passion. I think it’s a powerful combination..” (Community Partner)

Since 2018 CWELL students have co-designed and delivered ten community-based projects with the support of community partners and allies across the city. These range in scale and scope from large scale cross-city initiatives, like the King’s Island Play centre, the Public consultation process for Limerick’s Directly elected Mayor in 2020, and *the Well-Being Way* resources, to a number of smaller-scale initiatives designed with local communities to address locally identified needs.

KINGS ISLAND PLAYGROUND AND OUTDOOR FITNESS CENTRE 2020

Project Members: Member 1, etc

July 2020, saw the successful conclusion of a CWELL project which began as part of the first CWELL class of 2014 -2016. The project involved the design and development of a playground in the Kings Island area of the city. The CWELL students who are members of the Kings Island community spent 5 years working with the community to advocate for this essential amenity. The project represents a successful example of local people coming together to effect real and lasting change in their community. The park to was successfully launched with local media coverage, including a piece on Limerick 95 FM.



CWELL COMMUNITY PROJECTS 2020

ACTIVE MOMS 2020

Project Members: Member Danielle Hickey, Laura Hughes, Leeanne O' Donnell, Patrice Toomey



The Healthy CWELL group members were concerned with the health interventions that offered both an active lifestyle and a chance to socialise with peers. They identified that young Mothers in their community were particularly in need of such an intervention. They designed an introductory 5 week gym programme involving a one hour gym session per week. The unique aspect of this programme is that those organising and

leading it including the gym instructor were all local young women themselves. The group piloted the initiative in Nov/Dec 2019 with 6 young Mothers. The programme was very well received and when offered again in early March 2020 35 young women registered. Unfortunately, it was not possible for the second round of the Active Moms programme to go ahead due to the Covid 19 lock down.

SOUTHILL HUB COMMUNITY GARDEN 2020

Project Members: Ashley Emwanta, Audrey O' Sullivan, Ita McGurran, Cecilia Power - O'Mahony, Xing Yun Gao

The Green CWELL group were interested in green issues – recycling, waste management, eco gardens etc. As a group they decided to research the possibility of a community garden in their community. As part of their research they visited the Southill Hub Community Garden. This community garden had been a valuable community resource however budget and staff costs as well as dwindling volunteer numbers meant that the garden was in decline. The group were keen to lend their support and thus their project become the



revitalization of the Southill Hub Community Garden. They achieved this in a variety of ways, volunteering their time in the garden, securing funding, and encouraging greater use of the garden by the local community. The group created and successfully led a series of events in the garden including a Christmas event, Valentine Day event and a jewelry making day. The aim of such events was to encourage increased and more diverse use of the garden as a community amenity.

CWELL COMMUNITY PROJECTS 2020

LIMERICK LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR MAYOR 2020

Project Members: Jackie Condon, Margaret Fitzgerald, Christopher Mallard, Stephanie Ryan, Jan Jaraslav (Jerry) Strnad

The members of Supportive CWELL project group were keen to build both their personal and their community's capacity to identify community needs through community conversations/ consultations. The group were in the initial stages of planning their community conversations when they were asked to support the Your Mayor, Your Voice campaign. This campaign sought the opinions of people across Limerick City and County Council in relation to the role of the Limericks first directly elected Mayor. The Supportive CWELL group were essential to the success of this campaign and provided invaluable community insight.

TEA PARTIES FOR ELDERLY 2020

Project Members: Deirdre Barry, Oliver Conway, Rachel McCarthy, Linda Peters

The Social CWELL project group recognized high levels of social isolation among the older members of their communities. The project aimed to offer social outings for the elderly in their communities. A significant amount of research was undertaken with elderly groups across the city to establish the type of outing that would be suitable. The group planned to host four annual tea parties: a Valentine Ball; an Easter Bonnet ball; a Christmas Party and a Halloween Party. Plans for the first event were well advanced when COVID-19 necessitated its cancellation. Limerick City and County Council granted the Social CWELL project group €4,000 towards the costs of these events, further developing local synergies between the Council, Community and University.

THE WELL-BEING WAY 2021

Project Members: Amanda Clifford, Catherine Kinnane, Geraldine Minogue, Geraldine O'Dywer, Mary Moynihan, Maureen Power, Laura Waters



Created in response to the challenges faced by communities during the pandemic, the Well-Being way is a coffee table book with accompanying activity pack, comprised of original content created by the students as well as contributions by members of communities in Limerick. With an intergenerational focus, the book provided support and activities to address the social isolation resulting from COVID-19 restrictions.

CWELL COMMUNITY PROJECTS 2021 / 22



WALL OF HOPE 2022

Project Members: Stacey Hogan, Hayley Purcell, Katelyn Fitzgerald, Jim Gilensen

Project Partners: Garryowen Residents Association, Limerick Enterprise Development Park LEDP

In collaboration with the Garryowen Residents' Association, this project sought to promote positive mental health in the Garryowen area and beyond, with a particular focus on youth mental health. Working with the community, the project team created a mural of positive affirmations and information on local help lines, in order to address the challenge of suicide ideation and depression.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT 2022

Project Members: Meagan O' Halloran, Teresa Gardiner, Sinead Buggle, Helena Kelly

Project Partners: St Munchins Community Centre, Ballynanty Residents Association

The purpose of this project was to enhance community spirit in the Kileely and Ballynanty areas through the refurbishment of areas in the community identified locally as being of significance.

These included the historic graveyard in Kileely, and the Marian Shrine and playground in Ballynanty. The project also held interviews with older members of the community in order to capture their Following a series of interviews with older people in the area, the project also provided a community newsletter template in collaboration with the Ballynanty Residents Association.



from L-R Meagan O' Halloran, Teresa Gardiner, Sinead Buggle, Helena Kelly with Father Pat Seavers at the Marian Shrine, May 9 2022

CWELL COMMUNITY PROJECTS 2022

#MOYROSS MADE ME 2022

Project Members: Sarah Hogan, Katriona Murphy, Pauline Vereker, Eoin Fanning

Project Partners: Moyross Youth Academy

The purpose of this project is to research the nature and role of aspirations among young people in the Moyross area. The project held world café style youth consultations with young people aged 8-14. Focus groups were also held with Moyross Youth Academy staff and with Moyross Community Champions. Three local role models were identified, and in-depth interviews were recorded with these individuals. The findings of the research were presented back to all who took part in the research in a celebratory event at Moyross Youth Academy.

SHINE A LIGHT 2022

Project Members: Phonsie O’Connell, Marian McGuane, Mdudizi Dube, Orla Skelly

Project Partners: Help the Homeless Limerick, Novas

This project sought to bring attention to the work undertaken by volunteers involved in homeless outreach services and also to broaden our understanding of what homelessness is, how it is manifested and how it is experienced. The main output from the project was the creation of an educational video, including interviews with local Limerick volunteers.



from L-R Shine a Light project team members, Mdudizi Dube, Orla Skelly, Phonsie O’Connell, talking to Jackie Purcell and Annemarie Sheehan with fellow team member Marian McGuane

CWELL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FACILITATOR

O'Sullivan *et al.*, (2019) highlight the importance of support structures when working with non-traditional students in a higher education context. Their research demonstrated the need to support non-traditional students *throughout their time at university* in ways that go beyond academic support and that *does not end at the point of access*. The responses from participants in this evaluation supported this opinion: they described the support that they received from CWELL staff as “pivotal” to their success and their ability to complete their studies. Whilst all of the students identified their tutors as being ‘excellent’, ‘very supportive’ and ‘knowledgeable in their subject areas’, CWELL’s introduction of the role of the community facilitator was described as a “game-changer” by both students and community partners.

“One of the most important buy-ins is since they took on [Community facilitator] that individual person. That actual role has made a huge difference and that is definitely something that would have to be retained. It is extremely important for outreach to the community as well as student support.” (CWELL Partner)

Students described how having an identified person was vital in terms of helping them navigate the 3rd level system, whilst also providing practical support, encouragement and trouble-shooting. The students described this role as “the rock of that whole course” and “the glue that holds the hold thing together”. This role was considered especially important for the retention of students.

“I really think that if we didn't have [community coordinator] there, we wouldn't have the same amount of people going into 2nd year and I think for courses like this that's what courses are missing (a dedicated person) it's necessary to a course coordinator just like Eileen because otherwise people are excluded or drop out and she was the best, she looked after us so much.” (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

“I would have dropped out.” (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20, 19-21, 20-22, 21-23)

“I would have dropped out. I absolutely would.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

The Community Engagement Facilitator was regarded as a huge support for students in helping them to overcome their self-doubt and supporting their academic confidence.

“If ever there was a doubt in my mind about anything, if I ever felt like, oh God, I can't do this or I'm not doing it to a high enough standard or whatever, you text her and she was straight on the phone. She'd never miss a beat.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

“It was just, you know you might feel a bit overwhelmed and she just had the kind words.” (CWELL Student)

CWELL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FACILITATOR

In line with existing evidence (Sullivan, 2019) that showed the significant importance of having that identified support person who is embedded within the university, engendered a form of bridging capital that supported a shift in CWELL students from a non-academic or a weak academic identity to a stronger academic identity. This relationship also resulted in students moving from a sense of separateness and difference in terms of their academic capabilities to a sense of confidence in their ability to perform academically. This in turn laid a foundation for the development of increased confidence and a sense of belonging.

"It was just, you know you might feel a bit overwhelmed and she just had the kind words." (CWELL Student)

"A lot of the time I felt like, oh God, I'm dragging the group back or I'm doing something wrong or whatever, and I should leave this course and she's there to say no, you're doing fine. You're doing amazing. It wouldn't be the same without you, you know." (CWELL Student)

The investment on the part of the university in supporting this position was clearly deemed to be paying dividends by both students and community partners.

"You feel the support. You feel welcomed." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

"She was very much like actively cheering me on, all of us on." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"I put my hands up. I would not have completed it without [community facilitator]. She was pivotal in me finishing. She really was and if that support wasn't there it would make it difficult for people to complete the programme." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

"I think [community facilitator] is the pillar of the programme. I don't think this programme would go any further without her because she's brilliant. If we were stuck with anything she was there to help us I think out of everybody the most support we got was out of [community facilitator]." (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS



CWELL graduates 2021

from left to right: Geraldine Minogue, Catherine Kinnane, Mary Moynihan, Laura Waters, Amanda Clifford, Maureen Power and Geraldine O'Dywer.

EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

One of the key themes to emerge from the focus groups was the role CWELL plays in the access and widening participation agenda within the university. For over three decades, the principle of Equity of Access to Higher Education has been enshrined in Ireland's Education Policy. The participants in this evaluation underscored how the CWELL diploma embodies this principle and the significant contribution CWELL makes to the implementation of the goals set out in the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (extended to 2022) at the local level. This is particularly the case as it relates to access and participation of first-time mature students who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and/or are lone parents.

“Having a young child and having the flexibility to do the course is why I chose it and it was the wellness that I wanted to gain most from it and coming from a low-income family perspective we had the opportunity to attend third-level education and to expand our opportunities for our children and ourselves.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

Despite the existing Mature Student Access infrastructure within the university all the participants identified CWELL as being the “draw” and “gateway” into 3rd level education for them.

“It was my first time at university.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

“From the university's point of view, there is so much to be learned from this type of programme, like from the point of view of getting people into education who have never been in 3rd level education before. It's so significant because you really don't have opportunities when you are from certain places.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

This view was reiterated by the community partners interviewed. One respondent who had worked for over two decades in marginalised communities across the city suggested that CWELL ‘opened the door’ to 3rd level.

“[I] Saw the merit in it (CWELL) straightaway, in that you were, I suppose, opening the 3rd level door to people, I suppose, who really would not have had any experience, any positive experience of 3rd level education.” (Community Partner)

The importance of the availability of part-time and flexible learning options for the cohort of students represented in CWELL has been highlighted nationally in the recent *Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education* (2021), which found that short-cycle courses and/or programmes, provided over one or two-years, provide greater access for the most disadvantaged and help to overcome barriers to participation in higher education among this cohort of students (HEA 2021). When asked why CWELL appealed to the students in comparison to any other programme of study that the participants could have done as mature students in the university, they cited the “**flexible nature**” of the programme. “**It was so flexible.**” (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

CWELL resonates with national policy objectives to empower communities and activate participation, social inclusion, sustainable development and social justice, as set out in the *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024*.

Crucially, CWELL provides opportunities for those who have left school before obtaining any educational qualifications, while also acting as the mechanism to positively address the lack of 3rd level qualifications among the participants.

“I didn’t do my leaving cert and none of my kids had gone to university so I’m the first to have graduated and that was a huge thing for me.” (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

This was echoed by the community partners who highlighted the enabling effect of CWELL to support people to break free from the shackles of educational underachievement by providing a ...

“Non-threatening pathway into the world of 3rd level education” (Community Partner)

One of the innovative elements of the CWELL programme is the intentional way that it seeks to integrate student volunteer work into the curriculum. In addition to supporting student experiential learning, this also contributes to the Government’s *National Volunteering Strategy (2021-2025)* which seeks to recognise, support and promote the unique value and contribution of volunteers to Irish society. Whilst volunteering in their local community is a mandatory requirement of the CWELL Diploma, the majority of participants highlighted how the CWELL diploma offered them access to accredited recognition to consolidate the years of unpaid work experience that they had already amassed doing voluntary work in their local communities.

“I’m being recognised now for the [voluntary]work I was already.” (CWELL Student—Class of 19-21)

“As a community activist I’ve got recognition and it was great to get recognition even though I was doing the work for a number of years anyway.” (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

Community partners shared this view.

“The beauty of CWELL is that it gives credence to the work that some people are doing that wasn’t otherwise acknowledged.” (Community Partner)

EDUCATIONAL ACCESS & PARTICIPATION

Student participants described how engaging in CWELL changed their perceptions of the university from “that’s for other people” to “I belong, and it (university) is for me”.

“When you hear the words UL that kind of put blinkers on you straight away ‘I’m not able for UL’ but then when I asked people [in the community] who had already done it those fears were gone. It’s not just for rich people.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

“We are in college and we are proud of who we are and where we came from, we are opening doors for other people from disadvantaged areas. If we can do it, they can do it.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

Before entering the CWELL programme, the majority of CWELL students did not think that university was within their reach. There was a sense that they were not of the world of 3rd level education. “I thought there was never a chance in the whole world I would ever get near university education because where we lived was a working-class area. The university was there, it was like a different country (but) I realized (through CWELL) it was possible to go to university” (CWELL Student).

“I didn’t have a chance at education so I always felt until CWELL that I was on the back foot, I was always playing catch up with people who were more educated than I was and now I don’t feel that way.” (CWELL Student—Class of 19-21)

“My family, like my kids my grandkids, are so proud of me and I’m showing my grandkids and saying to them stay in school and learn, learn, learn don’t make the mistakes I made.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

“Our friends and our family and the community are so proud of us you know going back to education, you’re never too old to learn or to go back into education.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

Students also talked about the sense of pride they, their families and their wider communities have because they are going (or went) to university and the potential impact of that on altering the cycle of educational achievement in their families and their communities. The knock-on effect of which was positive intergenerational role modelling because they are now having a positive experience of education.

CAREER PATHWAYS / PROGRESSION SUPPORT

"We're bringing people to a baseline. We are opening their eyes to a very different world. We can't just walk away from them. I guess, there's a responsibility on us to ensure there is pathways and meaningful pathways into further education, to training, into employment. I think that's critical in terms of the next phase of CWELL and that's not a criticism. That's just an acknowledgement of the success of the programme that we now need to look at what the next step or the next phase of this is going to be." (Community Partner)

There was a unified view among both student and community participants that the next key piece of the puzzle in terms of the evolution of CWELL, is a need for a more heightened focus on progression pathways and career guidance. Students felt that they would have benefited from some advice on where they could go and what they can do with their UL diploma, both within UL and externally.

"Just a little bit of guidance at the end about where you can go and what you can do." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"It [advice on pathways] didn't happen within the course like it didn't happen and I feel that would be very useful just to say there's this that or the other." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

"It just ended. I had actually asked a question you know like I'm not sure exactly what I want to do now but something in the lines of mental health. I would like to go on and do something else and I was told there was a bit of psychology." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"I would say pathways. I would say that I am pretty much at a standstill now." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

Community partners expressed similar views and described the need to start looking at the next step in terms of pathways as an "acknowledgement of the success of the programme."

"It's absolutely phenomenal, that you're bringing people on an academic journey, and you're providing them with a 3rd level qualification. But we need to be now looking at the next step. What's the next step for these people? You know, we're empowering people or bringing them to a stage where they're potentially very strong, solid community leaders. But you know, we need to be able to look at pathways too." (Community Partner)

This evaluation identified the importance of creating pipelines that lead to future employment, training and educational progression. It also highlighted how this was a shared responsibility between CWELL, community and statutory agencies. Links with industry, the regeneration pathways to employment programme, and promoting the programme both internally and externally were viewed as key to this.

CAREER PATHWAYS / PROGRESSION SUPPORT

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Consistently, the literature has identified finance as a major barrier impeding mature students' participation in higher education (Burton 2022). Unsurprisingly, the majority of the student cohort accentuated the importance of their student fees being fully subsidised through the sourcing of external funding by the CWELL director. Students described how if they had to pay the course fee then access to the course would not be have been possible.

"I wouldn't be able to do this course if it wasn't free but that wasn't the actual attraction, the course was the attraction and learning and how it would be a benefit in where I live. The bonus was I didn't have to pay. The sad part is if I had to pay to do it, I would have had to refuse doing it." (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

"[The important thing is that] it's free because if I wanted to do CWELL for my community and I had to pay for it, I wouldn't have been able to do it. So, it's important that they continue to fund it." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

The majority of CWELL students are typically low-income students and/or dependent on social welfare. In this context, students and community partners highlighted the need for a small financial stipend for students to support them with travel costs and materials given that they are precluded from getting support through the student universal support Ireland (SUSI).

"Even though we were considered full-time students we didn't have any access to financial support and people would've availed of that. If students receive a small financial stipend of €200 it would keep people going." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"A little bit of funding to support the people who are attending... it won't take much money but also the fact that there is also something required for the students to help them along the way." (Community Partner)

IMPROVED HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

"You were empowered to take your choices back into your own hands." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

This was reflected in the types of lifestyle choices that the students described making both during and following their completion of CWELL. All of the participants described making changes in their

"I got some portion size plates because when we were talking about portion sizes and how things have changed over the years, that was something that I wasn't conscious of but now I am." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"It really put the light bulb on for me as far as my health was concerned. I am looking after my eating and my walking and it made me change my way of thinking as far as my health is concerned." (CWELL Student—Class of 19-21)

"I lost five stone in weight over the two years because I've changed my eating habits." (CWELL Student—Class of 19-21)

eating habits as a result of information they learned from the modules they took as part of CWELL.

Students also spoke about improvements in physical health due to intentionally taking up more exercise and giving up smoking.

"I do 10,000 steps every day and mindful walking." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

"I gave up smoking. I am off the fags (cigarettes) 3 weeks now." (CWELL Student—Class of 19-21)

However, demonstrating the depth of knowledge the students learned, it was also noted that "it wasn't just about eating healthy foods and drinking water and exercising. That was a subset of what was really important, what was really important was your mental health, you can't do anything physically unless you're there mentally" (CWELL Student). In this vein students demonstrated a deep knowledge of the interlink between physical health and mental wellbeing.

"Learned to switch off, just sit down for a half an hour and do nothing there is nothing wrong with it because I can have a skill complex that if I am not doing something all of the time then I am wasting my day and my life so I learned to look after myself first or I won't be any good to anyone else." (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

"It made me look at my mental health in so as far as I eat for comfort. Now I do a meditation and bring myself to a stage where I kind of go to a nice place for a couple of minutes and I say I'm not eating that food now it's no good for me. So, I'm really minding my mental health." (CWELL Student—Class of 19-21)

IMPROVED HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Healthy Ireland: A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing (Government of Ireland, 2013-2025), highlights the impact of socioeconomic status, levels of education, employment and housing on the prevalence of chronic health conditions. The framework identifies several ethical and guiding principles for implementation, which this evaluation showed, are embedded within the CWELL approach. One of the key objectives of CWELL is to empower course participants to effect positive change in their own well-being and lifestyles and within their communities. The evaluation clearly showed that CWELL is meeting this objective and is significantly contributing to positive well-being and healthy lifestyle changes both within course participants and their communities. When it came to well-being and healthy lifestyles the student participants described “going in empty and coming out full with knowledge” particularly as it related to nutrition, exercise, the use of harmful substances such as smoking and mental wellbeing.

“The concept of mindfulness. I live more in the present because like a lot of people I spent most of my time beating myself up about the past and worrying about the future so I didn't throw all caution to the wind but I definitely learned the value of mindfulness practice and I use it a lot for insomnia and everything.” (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

These well-being and lifestyle changes were attributed to the knowledge that was gained through their participation in CWELL.

The participants' experience of CWELL and having an opportunity to mix with people who ‘were different from them’ was viewed as breaking down social perceptions of non-belonging and of being negatively judged.

“I'm a foreigner from somewhere else you know and you get confidence to study with people from the community and there was no discrimination you know, that for me was empowering because I felt at home in class whenever I went to class I knew I was going into people who are going to support me, that is going to listen to me and hear what I say.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

IMPROVED PROFESSIONAL SKILLS & PRACTICE

The participant's cited CWELL as directly contributing to the acquisition of a range of professional skills and competencies such as research and evaluation, conducting community consultations, writing skills, oral presentation skills and effective communication skills.

"I had never gotten feedback from a job so the tutor said to me your job is to get feedback for the next class so then I had to go and do that and then present it to the class and that was part of the challenge. Then the presentation skills in the second year, we were all paired with one of the TUSLA workers and she said it was so informative and they're the kind of things that spur you on then." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"We were taught how to do consultations." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"We were taught how to hold world cafes and workshops and how to gather feedback and kind of analyse it and assess it." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"[writing skills] I ended up writing poetry, something I never did. Now I write a poem every single day. I like kind of playing around with words now it's very different. I love it. It's so different for me." (CWELL Student)—Class of 20-22

Community partners also noted how they "have seen a massive change in some people becoming more professional in the pieces of work that they (CWELL Students) do." (Community Partner)

"How to speak to people. We had outside examiners come from South Africa. I get very anxious and I won't be able to speak and that totally brought me out of my comfort zone and we had to speak and we had to speak about our projects and they were taken away." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"We have someone doing the CWELL course who is very involved in the community and it has given her confidence at meetings and I definitely feel like it empowered her and then I know two others who have gained employment in the Youth Service Industry from doing CWELL." (Community Partner)

"100% I have seen a difference in the parents as a result of participating in CWELL." (Community Partner)

"I have seen CWELL on a number of applications for positions here and immediately they were interviewed and they carried themselves very well." (Community Partner)

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Throughout the focus groups with both students and community partners, CWELL was described as a transformative experience for all those who participated in it. The relationship between experiences of social exclusion and diminished self-confidence is well documented in the literature (Baumeister 1995, 2005). Research has shown that experiences of social exclusion correlate with relational devaluation, poor confidence and low self-esteem, a consequence of which is aversive physical and psychological well-being. CWELL participants reported lacking self-confidence and having negative self-perceptions before participating in CWELL. However, students noted that participating in CWELL counteracted those negative perceptions of self by instilling “confidence in their capabilities” and “helping them to see their value”.

“I have learned to value my time and to value myself because over the years I never really valued myself. I was a yes person the whole time. I’ve understood to say sorry, I can’t do that today. So I am valuing my time and myself. Because I never really did that. I never thought much of myself. I was constantly giving and giving and giving. So now I’m beginning to step back a bit and value myself and do the things that I want to do and the things that I don’t want to do.” (CWELL Student—Class of 19-21)

“It built my confidence and gave me extra knowledge about how to go about promoting myself.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

“I didn’t have the confidence to walk into a room. So I really do think I have changed my mindset from a personal view and that’s changed my whole life from a professional view.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

“I actually found my voice because of CWELL. I’ve learned to say no.” (CWELL Student—Class of 21-23)

Additionally, the social and ethnic mix of the students on CWELL endowed an appreciation and an acceptance of difference that was being brought back into their local communities.

“It has helped me greatly to understand more of different backgrounds. I was probably a bit black and white and I think everyone should be good and everyone should have gone to school. Everyone should have worked. Of course, I was brought up like that, but look everybody wasn’t and so to see that side of it, it opened up my mind.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

This personal development was also seen by community partners on the ground who work with and/or who have they have referred to CWELL.

"I have seen, certainly from the participants, their own social and emotional well-being improve. I certainly see personal development, I see people that have been on journeys, and you look at where their own personal baselines were and where they are actually at now. There's absolutely been significant progress." (Community Partner)

"I see them (CWELL students) develop a hell of a lot more than anything else. I have seen them more confident, more articulate, and more open to things." (Community Partner)

"I see people are mixing with other people outside of their traditional social group so they are coming into me now and they aren't afraid anymore, they don't feel like they are 'second-class citizens' anymore they don't feel like the underling coming into me anymore and that the confidence building I don't think you can do anything else in a disadvantaged community unless you build people back up and I think CWELL does that." (Community Partner)

At the heart of this personal development was a strong sense of belonging and recognition of the unique life experience and knowledge that the students were bringing into the classroom that was nurtured and respected by the CWELL staff and course lecturers.

"We had knowledge to bring to the course." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

"We felt that we could be ourselves and that was very important." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

"The tutors, professors, they didn't look down on us. There was no division." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

"They made it very comfortable for you." (CWELL Student—Class of 19-21)

IMPACT & OUTCOMES FOR UNIVERSITY AND CITY



CWELL graduates 2022

from left to right: Teresa Gardiner, Sarah Hogan, Mduduzi Dube, Haley Purcell, Phonsie O'connell, Prof Maura Adshead, Course Director, Katriona Murphy, Marian McGuane, Helena Kelly, Stacey Hogan, Katelyn Fitzgerald

UL STRATEGIC GOAL—CITY & REGION

The University's current strategic plan, *UL@50 Strategic Plan 2019-2024*, includes a commitment to the city and region, in order to 'share expertise and knowledge through research, education and engagement for the benefit of all society, with a particular focus on being a civic university, actively engaging with the city and region, and promoting inclusion and diversity.' For some time, however, there has been a feeling amongst regeneration communities, that the University remains separate and apart from much of the city.

"UL is so far removed from the reality of life in a lot of houses and households in Southill and St. Mary's Park, Moyross and Balinacurra Weston." (Community Partner)

The CWELL programme goes some way to addressing the gap between the University and its hinterland communities. Whilst a number of local agencies noted the important role that the University has in working with local community organisations and community residents to positively contribute to social issues and build social capital in marginalised communities, still there was a feeling that the University had not fully succeeded in this ambition.

"My original reason for wanting to get involved in CWELL was to make the university something that wasn't just out there. I felt that UL was still out there but it's an opportunity for us to bring UL right into the community. People would say we have UL access campus but I would say being very honest that it was very much disconnected (before CWELL)." (Community Partner)

There was a sense among the community partners that before CWELL the university was somewhat disconnected from the day-to-day realities of the scale of deprivation, social exclusion and educational inequality that exists for adults in the local regeneration communities and from the community organisations that serve them.

The introduction of CWELL was seen as a **remedy** for this. CWELL was viewed as bringing the "university to the community and the community into the university" in a way that was considered as "UL really reaching out to the community" (Community Partner).

"It [CWELL] is the strongest weapon, shall we say they [UL] have in their armoury when it comes to meaningful community engagement." (Community Partner)

A salient theme among the interviews and focus groups with community partners was the lack of joined-up thinking, collaboration and coordination among the 'different arms' in the university with CWELL when it comes to community engagement indicated to them...

"The left arm doesn't know what the right arm is doing. It is so disparate. The learning for UL is maybe CWELL should own that space giving its history and impact in communities." (Community Partner)

UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community partners gave several examples of multiple weekly contacts by members of different facilities within the university saying, “they would love to be doing more in the communities”. While the intention was “considered to be noble” there was a prevailing view among community partners that CWELL were already doing this and doing it very well. What was needed in this regard was...

“There needs to be a mindset shift with regard to CWELL and it needs to be given the necessary recognition within the hierarchy (of UL) and acknowledge it for what it is. It is a key piece of the access, the civic engagement programmes within UL. It is the strongest weapon they (UL) have in their armoury when it comes to meaningful community engagement and development with the most vulnerable and marginalised communities in the Country.” (Community Partner)

Community partners were unequivocal in their views that CWELL should be the main mechanism for the wider university community to engage with local community organisations “given its history and impact in communities” ...

“Rather than me speaking to 10 people in UL if there was coordination by the main stakeholder which is CWELL, to come and say listen we have 3 faculties in UL looking to do a project in these areas they're looking for five grand they're looking for 10 grand they're looking for seven grand do you want see if one of them fits your strategy. That would make our lives a hell of a lot easier because at least we know we're getting the genuine projects if it were CWELL leading or gatekeeping it.” (Community Partner)

“That it [CWELL] isn't recognised within the wider UL sphere as a very important part of their community outreach engagement. I think that's really important. I think it's something that we need to look at.” (Community Partner)

Whilst it was acknowledged that there have been incredible interventions from the university, the feeling was that these tend to happen very much in isolation. CWELL was viewed as being ideally placed to act as a co-ordinating mechanism to insure greater continuity across the university in their “essential role” of community enhancement...

“If you had CWELL as some sort of coordinating mechanism I think it could hugely enhance the scale and depth of what it is we are doing and trying to do.” (Community Partner)

There was a recurring view that an opportunity “for CWELL to grasp the nettle in terms of community engagement in its totality across UL.” (Community Partner)

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE CITY

Supporting access to education and training, improving quality of life, closing gaps in health and wellbeing, building local leadership capacity and supporting civic engagement in local communities are all key objectives of the *2013-2024 Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan* (LRFIP). Community partners interviewed identified the CWELL Diploma as an “essential piece of infrastructure” in realising the objectives of the social pillar of the Regeneration Programme in Limerick.

“It [CWELL] is empowering them (students) to shape the agenda and shape the social fabric of the communities in a very positive way. And ultimately, that's what Regeneration has to be about. It's about improving life outcomes for families and children.” (Community Partner)

A recurring theme in the focus groups with students and stakeholders was the role that CWELL plays in building social capital in some of the most marginalised communities in the country. It is well documented that Limerick City is characterised by high degrees of social, educational and economic inequalities in comparison to national norms. According to the recent statistics, some of the most disadvantaged Electoral Districts (EDs) in the country are concentrated in Limerick City. CWELL has an intense focus on what has become known as *Limerick regeneration communities*. These include the EDs of Ballynanty, St. John's A, Galvone B, Rathbane and Prospect B - communities that lag behind national norms on every indicator used to measure disadvantage including dependency on social welfare, levels of unemployment and educational attainment. The deeply entrenched nature of social, economic and educational exclusion in these communities has resulted in them undergoing an intense government-mandated programme of physical, social and economic Regeneration since 2008.

“CWELL is bringing us back to the essence of what community development should be all about, about the communities becoming masters of their own destiny, about empowering the community, developing the community in a meaningful way” (Community Partner)

The perception of the CWELL programme as an essential element to social regeneration was also evident in student responses who described acquiring the skills and knowledge to ‘lead change, starting from the level of communities supporting them in developing their ideas and ways to respond’ (CWELL student). Students described the CWELL model as one that empowered them to collaborate with the residents in their local communities to identify pertinent issues, devise community-led solutions and collectively participate in decisions and activities that affect them.

“It is ground-up work. You go out and you ask people questions. You find out what's needed. It's not you're on the outside saying oh that would be great. You are actually working together with the community.” (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE CITY

CWELL students highlighted how they have become more civically aware and engaged, encouraging local people to become more involved in their local community and being politically active.

"I've learned so much about politics. I know how local governments work, how elections are run, and how important it is for each household in an area to vote. I'm trying to encourage people to be more involved and to use their votes locally more because local government affects us personally in our home." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

They also highlighted **the rippled effect of the skills acquired** in CWELL. The participants described how CWELL equipped them to go back into their communities, where capacity was low, and take the lead in terms of supporting the development of other community members.

"From the classes that we had with politics, I ended up going into politics and am a representative for a political party and an equality officer." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

These observations suggest that CWELL is also making a significant contribution to the strategic objectives of the *National Volunteering Strategy (2021-2025)* in particular the implementation of developing and supporting volunteering environments so that it contributes to vibrant and sustainable communities. As one student put it...

"Your kind of encouraging other people then you're sharing those skills with them." (CWELL Student—Class of 18-20)

"We went out and consulted with the community, identified an issue, we came up with this project." (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS



CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the data from the evaluation demonstrates that CWELL is making an important contribution towards positively “altering the social fabric in some of the most marginalised communities in the country” through transformative education. It is clear that CWELL occupies a unique place in UL’s Access and Widening Participation agenda by attracting and engaging with populations who have typically been precluded from participation in higher education. The social and educational impact of projects initiated by CWELL across the city of Limerick were highlighted as having a phenomenal impact on the lives of people living in some of the most disadvantaged communities across the city. This in turn demonstrated the important contribution that the university, through CWELL, is making towards working with local community organisations and community residents to positively contribute to addressing social inequality and building educational capital in marginalised communities. Integral to CWELLs success in this regard is the ability to build and maintain respectful and responsive partnerships that are underpinned by reciprocal trust.

CWELL students themselves report that the programme is “life-changing”. Community partners suggest that it presents a model of effective practice and learning that should be replicated by all those who work with marginalised and excluded communities.

“When it comes to community, politicians should be doing this (CWELL). All those TD’s, everyone, they should be doing this. They should know that it’s about the community. Learning what’s needed and do what’s needed, not what you think is good... CWELL needs to be in every community centre in Ireland. It’s vital, so vital.” (CWELL Student—Class of 20-22)

“I think it’s really important just to acknowledge the work that Maura and Eileen have done on this. I think it’s absolutely powerful work and they have been so accommodating, so engaging, so insightful, so understanding. It’s a pleasure working with them, it really is. They are brilliant.” (Community Partner)

This evaluation demonstrated that the CWELL community-university partnership is achieving its stated aims and objectives in working ‘with’ local communities and stakeholders to affect positive changes in:

- 1) Physical and mental health and wellbeing
- 2) Personal development and skills acquisition
- 3) The application of local knowledge to development practice and;
- 4) Leading and sustaining positive change.

CONCLUSIONS

CWELL's contribution toward improving the quality of life and to the development of healthy communities was evident in the significant lifestyle and community changes reported throughout this evaluation by student participants and community partners. The data highlighted the ways CWELL operates as an important lever in several key local and national policy priorities.

At a local level, the data from the evaluation demonstrated that the work of CWELL was firmly grounded in the **Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan (LRFIP)**. In particular, CWELL is considered to be "an essential piece of infrastructure" in realising the objectives of the social pillar of the LRFIP. This is especially true as it relates to improving the quality of life of residents in the regeneration communities, improving the health and well-being of the population, closing gaps in health with the average population, improving the social environment and supporting civic engagement in the community objectives of the LRFIP social pillar.

Equally, the data highlights the significant contribution that CWELL is making towards the mission of **UL@50 Strategic Plan** ambitions to be a civic university, actively engaging with Limerick, whilst developing inclusion and diversity.

At a national level, the evaluation demonstrates that CWELL is positively contributing to the implementation of **Healthy Ireland: A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing** (Government of Ireland, 2013-2025) by promoting positive well-being and healthy lifestyle changes for both course participants and their communities.

Equally important, the evaluation demonstrated the important role CWELL is playing on behalf of the university in attracting and retaining the specified target groups set out in the **National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019**, which was extended to 2022 (HEA, 2022). This is particularly the case as it relates to access and participation of first-time mature students who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, and/or who are lone parents.

The evaluation also revealed the unintended positive contribution that CWELL is making toward realising the strategic objectives of the **National Volunteering Strategy (2021-2025)** namely increasing the participation and diversity in volunteering and facilitating, developing and supporting volunteering environments in a way that contributes to vibrant and sustainable communities.

CWELL's success in this regard is attributed to four key elements:

- the flexible nature of the course,
- the community focus of the curriculum,
- the community based delivery of the programme and, most importantly,
- the appointment of a community course facilitator. This support was deemed to be the most critical factor contributing positively to the student experience, academic confidence, sense of belonging, overall retention and meaningful community engagement.

In light of the learnings to emerge from the evaluation, the following set of recommendations is made:

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Retention of the role of Community Facilitator

The university should integrate the CWELL Community Facilitator position permanently into the CWELL programme.

The investment on the part of the university in supporting this position of the community facilitator was clearly deemed to be paying dividends by both students and community partners. The introduction of this role was described as a 'game-changer' and one that was essential in terms of student retention and success.

It was also considered one of the most important elements for stakeholder partnership and engagement.

2. Pathways and Progression

The programme should develop a more heightened focus on progression pathways and career guidance.

Given the important emphasis placed on the need to develop coherent pathways leading to further education, training and employment it is recommended that CWELL develop clearer links with UL admissions office, industry and the Regeneration *Pathways to Employment* programme. Given the community-oriented nature of the CWELL programme, it is also recommended that links are made with the local adult education information and guidance service which are well placed to provide students with community-based information, support and guidance on the further educational options open to students upon graduation.

3. Financial Support

The CWELL programme should continue to provide fully subsidised student course fees. This is considered to be essential to access and participation in the course.

CWELL students represent an atypical student cohort that is a key target in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (extended to 2022). As such, they are generally low-income, first-time mature student entrants. Yet, they were precluded from eligibility for financial support because the course is not recognised as full-time. To remedy this, it is recommended that CWELL engage with the office of Limerick Regeneration and Limerick City Community Development Project to explore the possibility of extending the current 3rd level education bursary to include CWELL students. This once-off payment was deemed sufficient to support students with their travel and material costs.

4. Curriculum Content

The module on personal development needs revision.

This module should focus on 'professional boundaries, how to work with conflict within communities, and how to work effectively with groups'. Where additional therapeutic support is deemed desirable or necessary, CWELL should explore the possibility of community partners providing this support offsite through their counselling services.

3 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Curriculum Feedback

Provision should be made for clearly signposted formative feedback in all modules.

Students reported a desire for more formative feedback during the module delivery, as opposed to summative feedback at the end.

6. Internal and External Recognition and Awareness of CWELL

The CWELL team should engage with the marketing and communications division within the university and the careers services division to devise an internal and external awareness and promotion strategy to build the profile of CWELL and its students within and beyond the university.

Community partners highlighted what they perceived to be a lack of recognition on the part of the university for what CWELL is achieving and the important role it is playing in providing opportunities for those who have left school before obtaining any educational qualifications, while also acting as the mechanism to equip students with the skills and knowledge to **“fundamentally alter the social fabric and some of the most marginalised communities in the country.”** (Community Partner)

This lack of internal recognition or awareness was cited as being linked to a lack of external awareness and recognition of the CWELL qualification among industry partners and potential employers. There was a collective view that there was a need for internal and external awareness and marketing campaigns that would familiarize the wider university community with CWELL and opportunities for engaged community projects but also with industry partners to market graduates, connect them with potential employers, and to promote the programme as a Level 7 qualification.

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