Nurturing Networks

Fostering community connections with people who have experienced forced displacement

TRiSS Academic Research Fellowship Report

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Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
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Above all, we appreciate the engagement of so many learners and volunteers in the English conversation classes organised as part of the Trinity University of Sanctuary initiative which have been a vibrant source of intercultural interaction and mutual learning since their inception in 2022. We would also like to express our thanks to colleagues in Trinity who have helped to make these classes a success and who have collaborated with us on further outreach and cultural activities. In addition, we acknowledge the links forged between the classes and other organisations in the community. We deeply appreciate how these organisations have contributed their expertise on issues relating to employment, education, volunteering, and accommodation. Cultural connections are an important aspect of this programme, and we are particularly grateful to the National Gallery of Ireland for facilitating tours and workshops for learners attending the classes. We also appreciate the further links developed between the classes and other cultural institutions.

We hope this report captures how positive connections can be nurtured on a local level in response to challenges faced by people from displaced backgrounds in Ireland today. Furthermore, we hope that this research shows how universities can create sanctuary through sustained and inclusive approaches to civic engagement.

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Executive Summary

This research investigated how supportive networks may be nurtured through community engagement with people who have experienced forced displacement. The study involved focus groups with 24 people from displaced backgrounds who attended English conversation classes organised in Trinity College Dublin as part of the University of Sanctuary initiative, along with 11 student and staff volunteers who delivered these classes. It also included interviews with seven participants from organisations working in the fields of integration support, volunteering, education, and the arts. The research thus reflected the purpose of these classes as a language and intercultural support programme and acknowledged the links established between this initiative and organisations in the community. The study focused on issues relating to language and education, employment, accommodation, and cultural engagement. It examined barriers to inclusion in these areas and explored how social connections may help to build inclusive communities. It also looked at how university civic engagement with people from displaced backgrounds may enable the development of supportive networks.

The findings of this research highlight the need for equitable and humane approaches to the reception of people from displaced backgrounds in Ireland. They also show that efforts are required to enable displaced people to access employment and education, including further support for language learning. In addition, the findings indicate the need for the provision of appropriate information to enable positive networks to develop within communities and to counter racism and hostility towards people who have experienced forced displacement. This research demonstrates the value of making connections as a means of navigating Irish society, and identifies ways of supporting people from displaced backgrounds to access employment and further and higher education. It shows the benefits of volunteering and engagement with the arts in relation to promoting intercultural sharing, fostering wellbeing and resilience, and building social networks. In addition, this study demonstrates how universities can create sanctuary by nurturing inclusive environments for learning and social connection. Regarding university civic engagement in this field, the following recommendations have been made:

1. Create a welcoming and inclusive environment, be aware of how trauma may be exacerbated by reception conditions and other post-arrival challenges and injustices.
2. Promote civic engagement initiatives through multilingual and multimodal communication.
3. Recognise the mutual learning in volunteer-led language and intercultural support programmes and the benefits of such initiatives for university students and staff; create volunteering opportunities for people from displaced backgrounds.
4. Pursue interdisciplinary links to develop further activities, for example, in relation to supporting access to education and employment.
5. Link with other organisations working in the fields of integration support, education, and volunteering, as well as cultural and sporting initiatives; explore collaborative projects.
6. Provide more places, pathways, and support for people from displaced backgrounds to enter higher education, advocate for the recognition of previous qualifications.
7. Conduct further engaged research with people from displaced backgrounds and organisations in the community; provide evidence-based information to counter false narratives regarding forced displacement.

Overview of the research

Research aims and objectives

This research aimed to explore how networks may be nurtured through engagement with people who have experienced forced displacement and how this may support social inclusion in Ireland. It centred on the perspectives of learners and volunteers who took part in English conversation classes organised in Trinity College Dublin through the University of Sanctuary initiative[1]. These classes, which are delivered free of charge by university student and staff volunteers, offer language and intercultural support to adults from a wide range of displaced backgrounds[2].
The classes focus on social interaction and have run each semester since June 2022, involving up to 150 learners and 100 volunteers per week. This study was further informed by the perspectives of participants from organisations which engage in various ways with people from displaced backgrounds, drawing on community links established through the classes.

The objectives of this research were to investigate:

- Barriers to social inclusion faced by people from displaced backgrounds in Ireland.
- How network-building and community engagement may support social inclusion.
- How informal conversation classes may enable people from displaced backgrounds to build supportive networks.

The study focused on issues relating to language learning, access to education and employment, accommodation, and cultural engagement. This reflected the purpose of the conversation classes in Trinity College as a language and intercultural support programme. It also built on connections developed between this initiative and organisations in the community. However, it should be acknowledged that this research looks at only some of the many challenges facing people from displaced backgrounds in Ireland today.

Forced displacement in Ireland

Barriers to inclusion

Over recent years, the number of people seeking refuge in Ireland has increased significantly. Between 2022 and 2024, over 100,000 Ukrainians were admitted under the EU Temporary Protection Directive and over 40,000 people sought international protection in the state (Central Statistics Office, 2024; International Protection Office, 2024). Since 2022, immigration has become a prominent political issue in Ireland, with rising hostility apparent towards people from displaced backgrounds. This has been evident in increased far right agitation, protests, attacks on reception centres, and other violent acts including the riots which occurred in Dublin city centre in November 2023 (Cannon & Murphy, 2024).

[1] Since 2021, Trinity College Dublin has been part of the University of Sanctuary Ireland (UoSI) initiative, which encourages higher education institutions to foster 'a culture of welcome and inclusion for all those seeking sanctuary', see: https://ireland.cityofsanctuary.org/universities-and-colleges-of-sanctuary

[2] This report will refer to 'people from displaced backgrounds' or 'displaced people' to ensure a person-centred approach that covers all contexts of forced displacement. Specific issues of relevance to certain individuals, for example, people seeking international protection, will be highlighted as appropriate.

State support for people who have experienced forced displacement is limited, particularly for those who are seeking international protection. In this regard, reception conditions are a matter of significant concern. Since the introduction of the 'Direct Provision' system in 1999, people who are seeking international protection have been accommodated in centres which are sourced by the state but operated by for-profit companies. This approach has been widely criticised, for example, Lentin (2022) has highlighted the inhumane conditions experienced by people in Direct Provision, arguing that this system represents a form of 'coercive confinement' which constitutes racialised state violence. Additional emergency accommodation centres, former hotels and other premises, have also been established in response to the recent rise in arrivals. However, for extended periods since early 2023, the state has ceased to provide accommodation for single men seeking international protection, in breach of legal obligations to meet their basic needs (Irish Refugee Council 2023; 2024). This has resulted in thousands of men being forced into homelessness or being accommodated in state-run tented facilities (Irish Refugee Council, 2024).

Accommodation allocation reflects wider inequalities within the international protection system as evident, for example, in the higher level of state support for Ukrainians under temporary protection than for people seeking international protection (Daly & O'Riordan, 2023). This disparity also impacts issues such as access to work. Entry into employment is more difficult for people seeking international protection who must be at least five months in Ireland before they can apply for a 'labour market access permit'. Access to further and higher education is another challenge for people from displaced backgrounds in Ireland due to financial and other systemic restrictions (Brunton et al., 2019).

Language issues and support

Language often intersects with other barriers to social inclusion faced by displaced people. Research shows that learning English is a key factor in the integration of adult migrants in Ireland, particularly regarding access to employment (Ciribuco et al., 2024). More specifically in relation to people from displaced backgrounds, challenges associated with learning English have been highlighted in research with resettled Syrian refugees (Ćatibušić et al., 2021; IOM Ireland, 2021) and recently arrived Ukrainians (Ryzhova & Devlin, 2024). These studies also note that access to state-funded English language courses provided through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) may be affected by issues relating to transport, childcare, health, and disabilities. In addition, research indicates that more opportunities for the learning of Irish are required (Ciribuco et al., 2024).

Beyond the formal education sector, volunteer-led conversation classes have been found to support displaced people with language learning and to offer 'two-way' opportunities for network-building (Chick, 2019). The learner-centred, participatory nature of such classes also has the potential to promote wellbeing and post-traumatic growth (Palanac, 2022). In Ireland, informal English conversation classes, such as those delivered by volunteers through the national 'Fáilte Isteach' initiative, have been shown to support the social inclusion of adult migrants including people from displaced backgrounds (Ćatibušić et al., 2023). Higher education institutions can also play a valuable role in this field through civic engagement with people who have experienced forced displacement, as demonstrated in the language and intercultural support provided by the Irish Refugee Integration Network (IRIN) in Dublin City University (Daniel & Loftus, 2023).

Spaces for nuturing networks

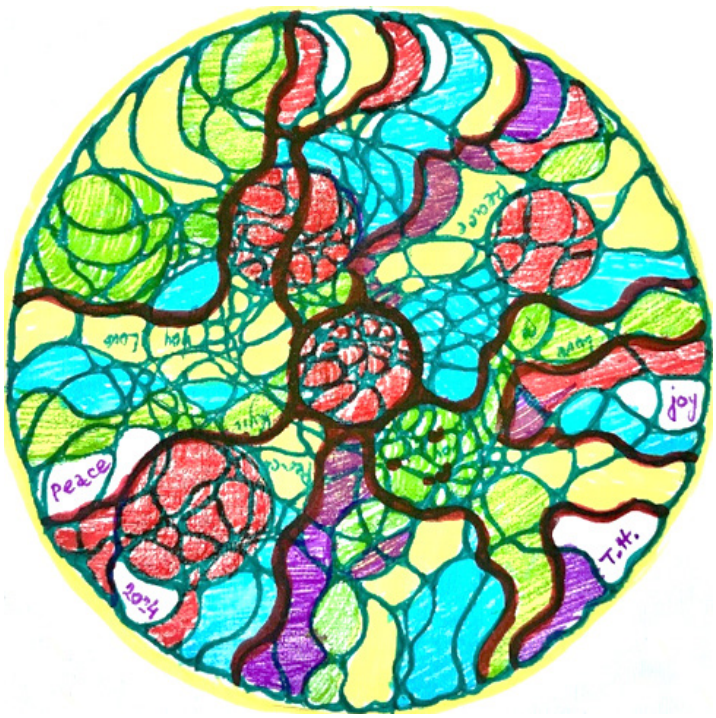
Community connections

This study sought to examine how informal language classes may create potential spaces for developing networks through community connections. International research has highlighted how challenges faced by displaced people regarding network-building may relate to social isolation, language, and attitudes within communities (Murad & Versey, 2021). It has also shown the need to foster trust to enable people who have experienced forced displacement to develop supportive relationships and engage with local services (Strang & Quinn, 2021).

The benefits of community-based initiatives in relation to supporting social inclusion have also been demonstrated. For example, Radford et al. (2021) reported on a refugee resettlement programme in rural Australia which enabled people to access employment and provided a range of initiatives offering language and intercultural support through social interaction. They noted how such holistic approaches can create what Phillimore (2021) refers to as 'opportunity structures' on a local level. Volunteering has also been found to foster social relationships and well-being, with research showing that it can support professional development, network-building, and advocacy among people from displaced backgrounds (Wood et al., 2019; Scanlon & Martin, 2022). In addition, engagement with the arts has been found to nurture a sense of belonging and enhance resilience in contexts of forced displacement (Nunn, 2022; Tavares & Benediktsson, 2024).

University civic engagement and community links

This research considered the capacity of the English conversation classes in Trinity College Dublin, which are now part of the national Fáilte Isteach network, to bring people from displaced backgrounds and university students and staff together. In particular, it investigated how community connections could be fostered through this programme and its additional outreach activities. During the research period, these additional activities included information events on education and training with representatives from the City of Dublin ETB Adult Education Guidance Service, the Irish Refugee Council, and the Trinity Access Programmes. A volunteering and employment preparation event was also organised with representatives from the Dublin Volunteer Centres and Business in the Community Ireland. Further activities included CV clinics offered by the Trinity Careers Service and liaison with a Housing Befriending Programme run by the Irish Refugee Council. Cultural engagement is another important feature of this language and intercultural support programme. Over the course of the study, this involved collaboration with the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI) which provided guided tours of the gallery and delivered a four-week art workshop series specifically designed for learners attending the classes. It also drew on connections within the university, with tours of the Trinity Book of Kells Experience arranged for the classes. Building on these links, this research explored how informal language classes in a university setting may create a welcoming environment for people from displaced backgrounds and nurture potential networks within the wider community.



Research methods

Research design

This research project engaged with adult learners attending the English conversation classes organised as part of the University of Sanctuary initiative in Trinity College Dublin, volunteers who took part in these classes, and individuals who have worked with displaced people in relation to various aspects of social inclusion. It adopted a community-based participatory action research approach (Campus Engage, 2022) involving focus groups with learners and volunteers who took part in the conversation classes during the academic year 2023-2024, as well as interviews with participants from organisations in the community. Seven focus groups were conducted with people who had taken part in the classes, five with learners, involving 24 participants, and two with volunteers, involving 11 participants. Seven interviews were also conducted with people from organisations working in the fields of integration support, volunteering, education, and the arts. One of the focus groups engaged specifically with people who had participated in the NGI art workshop series. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences in Trinity College Dublin.

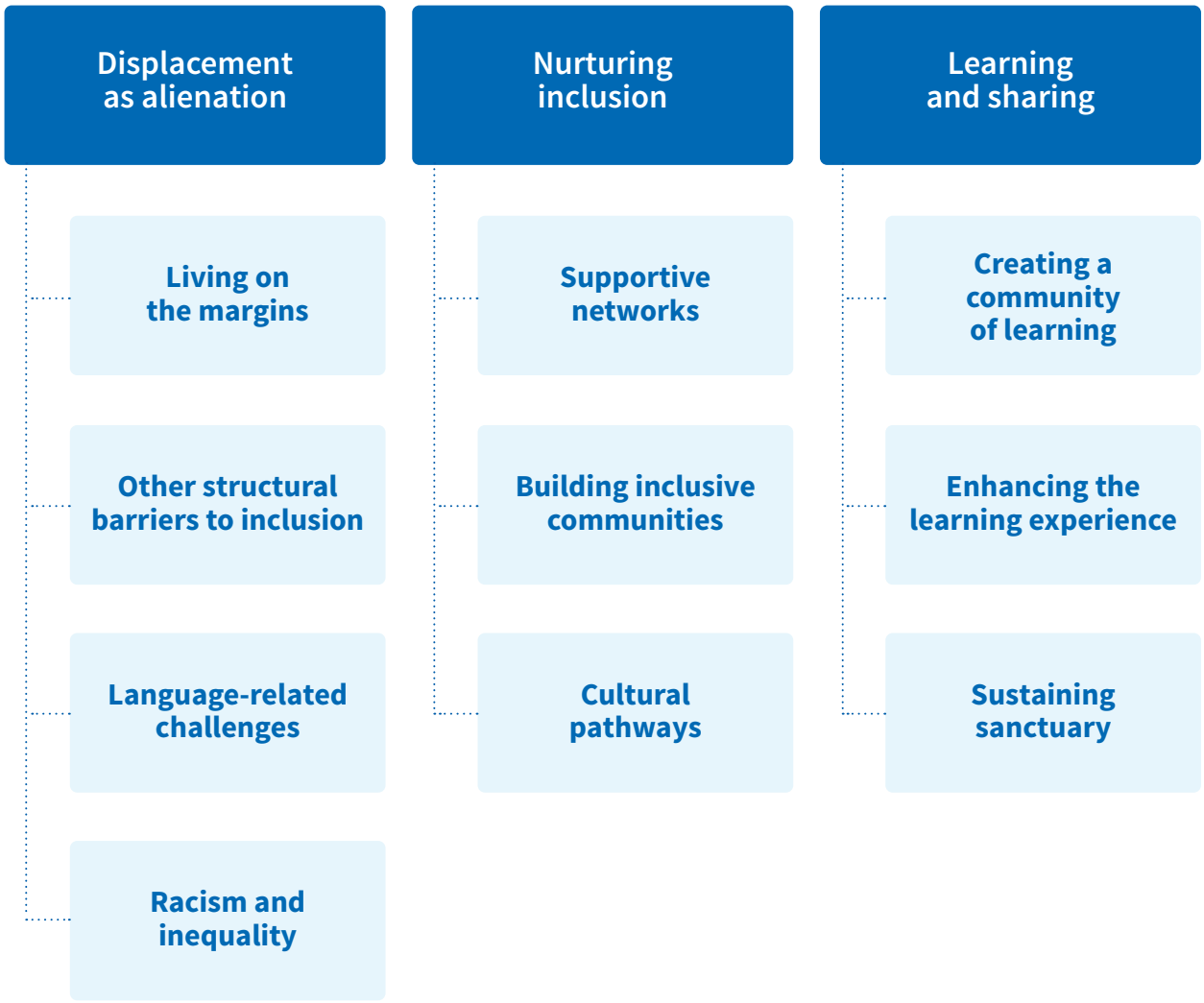
Data collection and analysis

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling was used to recruit participants in the focus groups and interviews. Most of the learners involved had attended either the Intermediate or Advanced level conversation classes, although three participants in the focus group regarding the NGI art workshop series were in the Beginner level class. The focus groups and interviews were conducted primarily through English, but multilingual support was provided for participating learners in the languages they requested, for instance, Ukrainian, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, Urdu and French. The focus groups with learners involved 13 women and 11 men, with 12 participants from Ukraine, three from Algeria, two each from Colombia and Syria, and one each from Bolivia, Guatemala, Pakistan, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Nine women and two men participated in the focus groups with volunteers which included seven students, three staff, and one member of the college alumni. The interview participants included two people from the NGO sector, three from local Volunteer Centres, one from the education sector, and an artist educator who facilitated the NGI workshops.

Six of the focus groups were held in-person in the university, while one of the focus groups with volunteers was held online at participants' request. Interviews were held online with five participants and in-person with two, again reflecting participants' preferred mode. The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and the recordings were then transcribed and anonymised[3]. Reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse the data from these transcripts. This involved familiarisation with the data, inductive coding, and the generation of themes through a process of ongoing reflection. The analysis resulted in the development of three overall themes: (i) displacement as alienation, (ii) nurturing inclusion, and (iii) learning and sharing. These overall themes and their key thematic elements are presented in Figure 1. The research findings in relation to these themes are outlined in the following chapters.

[3] In the presentation of the findings, participants' perspectives will be reported in an anonymous, gender-inclusive manner. Findings from the interviews will be reported with reference to participants' fields of work such as the NGO or education sectors, their national organisation in relation to participants from the Volunteer Centres, or their role in the case of the artist educator.

Figure 1: Overall themes and thematic elements



Displacement as alienation

Living on the margins

The findings of this study identified accommodation as a major concern among people from displaced backgrounds. Key issues related to access to accommodation, being detached from society, and insecurity and tension within reception spaces.

Access to accommodation

Several participants in the focus groups with learners shared their experiences of homelessness in Ireland. Two of these participants had arrived at a time when the state had ceased providing accommodation for single men seeking international protection. One explained how the tiered approach to the allocation of accommodation, based on migration status and gender, had forced them into homelessness. They described the hardship they had endured:

> **It was cold, the last few months, it was cold. Those tents are so cold. And people they don't know what to do when you wake up.**

Participants acknowledged disparities within the system regarding reception conditions, one observed that 'about the accommodation for refugees, it depend of the luck'. Others who were more settled in Ireland noted the difficulty of finding affordable rental accommodation.

In the focus groups with volunteers, one participant described how they had also taken part in the Housing Befriending Programme run by the Irish Refugee Council. This involved university students supporting people who are exiting the Direct Provision system by helping them to search for accommodation in the private rental sector. This participant remarked on how social factors, for example, landlords' reluctance to accept the state Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), intersect with fears of racial discrimination:

> **If you say that you're on the HAP payment then they don't even give them a viewing […] We've heard on multiple occasions like refugees changing their names to make it sound more Irish so that they would get into a viewing.**

The cross-societal problem of the lack of available housing in Ireland was emphasised in the interviews. One participant from the NGO sector described the impact of homelessness on people who are seeking international protection:

> **It's such a huge barrier towards people integrating into society […] exacerbating issues for people who've already experienced very acute trauma and that has wider ramifications for them.**

This participant also talked about people who must leave Direct Provision centres when they have been granted status to remain in Ireland. They pointed out the challenges these people face in seeking rental accommodation at a time of intense competition and shortage of supply in the Irish housing market. In addition, they noted that some people 'might not have the literacy or the language or just the digital literacy skills' to engage with property websites or to contact landlords.

Detachment from society

The issue of conditions within state-provided accommodation was also raised in the focus groups with learners by some participants who commented on their own experiences of living in inhospitable and isolated environments. One spoke of life in a centre in which the management 'really treat us as if it's an army'. They talked about the lack of activities for families in the centre and how children were restricted to playing in their rooms. Another participant, who volunteered in sports activities involving displaced people, referred to the carceral nature of one of the reception centres they had visited with their running group. They described how they perceived living conditions there as detrimental to mental health:

> **If I was living in this place, I was become too crazy. Like the people say 'go bananas'. Because you can do nothing. You can't work, you can't have friends. You can see nothing, is really sad and really bad. […] Is like a jail with open doors.**

Participants talked about crowded conditions and lack of privacy in the accommodation centres, with one giving the example of a centre which housed 'about six to seven hundred people from different countries'. Those who lived in rural areas also spoke of the challenge of isolation and how the lack of adequate, low-cost public transport could affect access to healthcare, employment, and education.

These views resonated with perspectives expressed in the interviews. One participant from the NGO sector gave examples of poor conditions in emergency accommodation, including tented sites. They also talked about how the state's International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) sourced privately managed premises from for-profit firms:

> **IPAS are employing companies who are basically just providing security staff. The security staff are not trained to work with people from different backgrounds. They're not even properly trained to work with people.**

They commented on the need for well-run state reception centres with trained staff offering necessary services for new arrivals. Interview participants from the Volunteer Centres also spoke of the challenges faced by families living in cramped and stressful conditions in accommodation centres. They identified transport costs as a particular challenge for people seeking international protection who, at the time of this study, received an allowance of €38.80 per week. Another participant, from the education sector, stressed that life in Direct Provision centres or other precarious forms of accommodation was 'not conducive' to study. They also noted how long commutes from centres in isolated locations with inadequate access to public transport can negatively impact students from displaced backgrounds in higher education.

Insecurity and tension

The issue of transfer outside Dublin was identified by participants in the focus groups with learners as a source of insecurity and an impediment to network-building, especially for people seeking international protection. This illustrated the liminality of a system which often involves the further displacement of people around Ireland. One participant captured the constant uncertainty they faced:

> **What's gonna happen tomorrow? Maybe they will throw me far away, that's how it goes.**

In the focus groups with volunteers, participants also remarked on how the challenge of securing basic shelter and the risk of 'being moved ad hoc' impacted people's sense of belonging and connection. One observed how apprehension regarding an imminent move was a source of stress for learners in their group:

That feeling of displacement and not being able to plan. And that was really something they voiced and were frustrated about.

This concern was echoed in the interviews. One participant from the NGO sector outlined the impact of frequent displacement around Ireland on the networks that people had developed:

Being shifted around […] this is one of the issues. Actually, one of the major issues is they've made friends. They've made connections in whatever area they are, even if they're in tents.

This participant observed that moving people who had already secured employment was frustrating, counter-intuitive, and potentially harmful in relation to mental health. They also pointed out how the moving of families was highly problematic, considering how this can affect children's friendships and their connections to schools and communities. Similar views were expressed by the participant from the education sector who spoke of how students from displaced backgrounds faced 'the constant threat of being moved from one centre to another'.

One participant in the focus groups with learners shared how the insecurity faced by women in accommodation centres could be exacerbated by fear for their children. They spoke of how centre management could threaten to report mothers to child protection services for any perceived resistance to a governing system which strictly controlled the lives of parents and children:

You're trying to raise your voice, they will neutralise you […] So you live in that fear knowing 'I don't know what is gonna happen to me. Are they gonna take my son?'

This highlighted the vulnerability of women in an environment in which institutional power could be wielded against them by targeting their children. In response to such intimidation, this participant suggested 'maybe we need those sessions where we are being taught how to raise the kid in Ireland'. In the interviews, one participant from the NGO sector also felt that support was important regarding knowledge of the Irish system, for example, in relation to child protection. Another commented on the need for training for staff who often have 'no idea about culture' and warned of 'power trips' in the management of privately operated accommodation centres. The need for support for families was also emphasised by participants from the Volunteer Centres, with one noting how lack of access to childcare prevented women from engaging in volunteering. They spoke of the impact of this restriction on women 'who want to get out and meet people or, you know, gain some skills, or just socialise, just be out of these centres where they're under huge stress'.

The stressful environment in accommodation centres was further highlighted by another participant from the Volunteer Centres who described how the people they work with are accommodated in rooms of up to seven men apiece. The lack of personal space and potential for conflict within these crowded centres, in which individuals often have to share rooms with strangers who have different worldviews, was described by a participant in the focus groups with learners. They expressed their desire for relief from this ongoing tension:

I need peace, I need a private life, I need my identity, I need to breathe.

Other structural barriers to inclusion

In addition to issues relating to accommodation, the findings of this study identified further systemic barriers to social inclusion, particularly the impact of displacement on access to healthcare, employment, and education. It was apparent that these issues often intersected with reception conditions, language, and other challenges.

Access to healthcare

Participants in the focus groups with learners highlighted the link between living conditions and health. One, who had experience of homelessness, described how living in tents during the winter affected people's health and how this further impacted social engagement:

People was getting sick. And people was actually actively wanting to join […] lessons and everything. But if you're sick, like you're really not in the mood and you're not really like, healthy enough sometimes even to walk or go outside.

They identified structural barriers to healthcare in this liminal context, for example, regarding access to a GP, and noted how displaced people who were homeless relied significantly on support provided by volunteers and medical charities.

Despite the higher level of state support for Ukrainians under temporary protection, navigating the Irish healthcare system remained a challenge. As one Ukrainian participant said, 'I've been here for two years. I don't have a GP, I don't know how to get it'. Beyond finding a doctor, access to other healthcare services also proved difficult, with one participant sharing how they were simply advised to search the internet for a dentist:

I don't know which dentist I have to go […] I'm like doing a search on Google. Because this has helped me more than people.

Language issues also affected engagement with healthcare services, with one participant stating that they relied on translation apps when visiting the doctor. Others mentioned the need for more multilingual information to help displaced people understand the unfamiliar structure of the Irish healthcare system.

In the interviews, participants working in the NGO sector agreed that more support was required to enable people to access healthcare in Ireland. One noted the lack of mental health support, specifically in relation to people who have experienced trauma. They added that conditions in some accommodation centres could exacerbate mental health difficulties. They also felt that there is insufficient support for people in the international protection system who have long-term illnesses or disabilities.

Access to employment and education

Recognition of qualifications and experience

Regarding access to employment, a key issue identified by participants in the focus groups with learners was recognition of previous qualifications and experience. One participant who was an engineer talked about how they currently worked as a shop assistant, saying 'I would like to do a bigger thing maybe'. Another, who was also an engineer, worked in childcare. Challenges facing people who had worked in education were highlighted by one participant who was a primary school teacher and two others who had taught in higher education. One of these academics said they had contacted universities in Ireland but had received 'no information about research'. Another participant, who had experience in the field of drama, shared the challenges they faced in trying to access work in the arts and expressed their sense of professional displacement, saying 'I can't find my place'. The recognition of degrees from outside Ireland was an issue raised by several participants, as one said:

> **I have a master's degree from my country and I am looking for information on how to have my certificate recognised in Ireland, because I can't do anything with my certificate now.**

Another challenge mentioned by participants in the focus groups with learners concerned being able to produce evidence, such as transcripts, of qualifications from outside Ireland.

Participants in the focus groups with volunteers were also aware of the challenges facing people regarding the recognition of qualifications and experience, as one acknowledged:

> **I saw it across the board where people had the skills and education, and then they weren't able to apply them in their roles here.**

Similar issues were highlighted in the interviews, one participant from the NGO sector talked about the frustration expressed by highly qualified people, such as dentists, regarding restrictions on access to work in their field in Ireland. They pointed to a lack of logic in this exclusionary system, given the societal need for professionals from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, particularly in health-related services. Participants from the Volunteer Centres likewise identified challenges faced by people who were highly qualified. While they mentioned that, for people with strong multilingual skills, some voluntary opportunities exist in the areas of translation or English language tutoring, they stressed that companies and organisations should take concrete steps to enable highly skilled people to access their fields in Ireland, for example, through the provision of internships. The participant from the education sector also acknowledged the dilemma facing displaced people with qualifications. They suggested further education routes as a possible option, even if this initially involved 'taking a step back' in order to progress. They also stressed the need for greater recognition of previous learning.

Constraints on employment

Another barrier to inclusion faced by people seeking international protection related to obtaining a labour market access permit. While Ukrainians under temporary protection are entitled to work in Ireland, people seeking international protection must wait for this 'work permit'. At the time of this study, delays in the issuing of work permits meant that these people were often eight months in Ireland before they could access any employment. In the focus groups with learners, participants expressed frustration regarding this long delay, as one said, 'I was just hoping to get work permit to get a job and find something'.

Making personal connections was also perceived as valuable in relation to seeking work. However, this could be challenging in an increasingly digitised world, as one participant observed, 'if we apply through online, it is very rare to connect'. Another participant identified distance from major urban areas as a barrier to employment, noting that there were fewer opportunities outside Dublin or other cities. Regarding longer-term employment ambitions, two participants expressed an interest in starting their own companies in Ireland, although they acknowledged the need for business networks and access to investment. Another participant, who by the time of this study was working in the field of integration support, outlined challenges facing entrepreneurs from displaced backgrounds and emphasised the need to 'understand the system here' if people wish to start a business.

Participants in the focus groups with volunteers also noted employment as a major concern expressed by learners they had engaged with through the conversation classes. They were critical of the restrictions imposed on people seeking international protection in relation to obtaining work permits, with one saying that this could heighten the risk of 'exploitative employment'.

Likewise, in the interviews, one participant from the NGO sector commented on how waiting for work permits 'stifled' people by leaving them in limbo and how this could lead to the revisiting of traumatic experiences:

> **One of the lads was saying he's got too much time to think, he has nothing to distract himself. So now he's ruminating about all of the stuff that he left back in, let's say, Afghanistan.**

This frustration was also pointed out by participants from the Volunteer Centres. They spoke about how people seeking international protection often sought volunteering opportunities while waiting on their work permits. As one of these participants said, people are 'eager to do anything'.

Educational barriers

Participants in the focus groups with learners also raised the issue of access to additional educational courses, including English language courses. One mentioned the barriers they faced in relation to childcare, noting how they could bring their preschool child with them to the conversation classes in Trinity College, but not to other courses:

> **Thank you for you that you accept me, like I bring my daughter with me. Because I would like to attend all class English, but I can't with her.**

A participant living in a rural area noted transport as a problem in relation to accessing English courses provided by the ETB in their nearest town. The timing of English courses was also an issue for people in employment, with one participant pointing out 'I work in the morning, I need English classes in the evening'.

Lack of information regarding accessing higher education was another issue raised in the focus groups with learners. One participant commented 'I don't know how the college institution works and how you enrol', while another mentioned that it was difficult 'to find proper information on how to access universities in Ireland'. Financial impediments were also viewed as barriers to the pursuit of higher education, with one participant saying 'without money, you can't do any course.'

These challenges were acknowledged in the interviews. The participant from the education sector pointed out how lack of access to the 'Free Fees Initiative' and state-funded student support were the main barriers to engagement in higher education. They also noted that, despite the demand for places, the number of scholarships available to students from displaced backgrounds through the University of Sanctuary initiative is very limited. They further questioned the systemic barriers facing students who had managed to secure a place in higher education, but who were living in Direct Provision:

> **It's like the system doesn't want people to go to education. How do we design a system to make it as hard as possible to be able to- for people to leave the centre and access any services?**

They recommended that University of Sanctuary scholarships should include on-campus accommodation on a year-round basis as a key support, particularly given the challenges facing students in Direct Provision. In this regard, they said, 'I don't see how we can have a sanctuary scholarship, if we don't actually provide sanctuary […] sanctuary is a bed'.

Language-related challenges

Learning English was identified as a key issue in relation to building networks in Ireland. As a participant in one of the focus groups with learners said:

> **The language barrier is like, still the biggest barrier we have in order to make these connections and to merge or try to merge with Irish society.**

Others spoke about their experience of learning English in Ireland and difficulties they encountered. One participant noted how 'Irish English' differed from the 'classical' English they had been exposed to through formal education, saying 'you go outside and you not understand nothing, really nothing'. They also said that they found it easier to understand English spoken by other non-native speakers and felt that language issues had impacted their attempts to establish friendships with Irish people. Similar points were made by another participant who regarded the 'dialect' as an obstacle to comprehension:

> **I don't know, when I speak with people, they understand me. But when they speak for me, I don't understand!**

In the focus groups with learners, language was viewed as a challenge which intersected with other issues in relation to social inclusion. The participant who had found employment in the area of integration support highlighted the role of language in finding out about relevant services. Another participant noted how accessing and navigating information presented online in English can be challenging, in terms of both the linguistic and digital skills required. Several participants referred to English language proficiency as a barrier to seeking employment in their professional fields, as one said:

I am worried about my English. I don't know. I can work, yeah? Or I can't. Because maybe I need the higher level.

Many participants in the focus groups with learners expressed a desire to develop their English language skills. Some mentioned that they wanted to improve their speaking abilities, while others sought more formal courses including English for specific professional or academic purposes.

In the focus groups with volunteers, participants also highlighted language barriers faced by people they had worked with and how these could impact aspects of social inclusion. One illustrated how language was an issue in finding accommodation, saying that this process was easier to navigate 'when they speak better English'.

Similar issues were identified by participants in the interviews from the NGO sector, with one commenting that publicly funded English language support for adults should include more 'formal training' to align with individuals' 'long term goals' regarding education and employment. Another felt that access to language courses was an important 'first step' in supporting inclusion, noting that informal conversation classes could be useful:

To help them improve their English and get used to both Irish accents and Irish vernacular […] just so they're more relaxed around that kind of English.

Interview participants from the Volunteer Centres pointed out how engaging in volunteering could also help people to develop their English language skills. One noted, from their own experience, how volunteering can provide exposure to everyday, colloquial language:

You also learn the lingo, like 'the craic', you know, like 'lads', you know!

These participants emphasised that English language skills were not a prerequisite for volunteering and that the online registration system, I-VOL, specified the level of English required for each voluntary role. However, one participant acknowledged that digital literacy could be an issue for people regarding I-VOL registration since 'some of them have difficulties to use the internet, to use phones'.

Racism and inequality

In the focus groups with learners, participants brought up issues relating to racist incidents they had encountered. One spoke about their child's experience of bullying at school, saying 'kids, they take time to understand, some of them, they are not so nice and welcoming'. Another participant talked about anti-social behaviour they had witnessed among youngsters in Dublin and how this was directed at people from migrant backgrounds:

So eleven or twelve years old boys they come and they make something and they misbehave. Seriously misbehave. Sometimes slap on the head.

They suggested that education was required in response to this behaviour, although they did not view this hostility as a reflection of attitudes in Ireland as a whole. Participants were, nonetheless, aware of the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment in Ireland and how immigration had become a political issue. One spoke about how they had followed discussions on Irish radio regarding refugees and accommodation, remarking that it was perceived by some that 'unfortunately, we make a problem for Irish.' However, they viewed access to accommodation as a cross-societal challenge both 'for immigrants, and for the Irish people'.

Issues relating to race and inequality were likewise raised in the focus groups with volunteers. One participant, who had also volunteered with the Housing Befriending Programme, highlighted the risk of discrimination when seeking accommodation. They said that navigating the rental market seemed 'even harder' for people from displaced backgrounds because landlords 'are really not that welcoming'. Another participant spoke about inequity in the state's response to people who have experienced forced displacement noting what they perceived as racialised injustice within the international protection system. From their interactions in the classes with people from various African countries, they felt that systemic inequalities contributed to discrimination, both with regard to race and in relation to other intersecting factors such as social class.

In the interviews, participants shared their perspectives on the rising challenge of racism and anti-immigrant attitudes in Ireland. One participant from the NGO sector, commented on how the lack of communication about state provision for people seeking international protection was feeding into tensions, and how this was seized upon by far right agitators to whip up violent protests outside accommodation centres. They highlighted the vulnerability of people exposed to this intimidation, especially as many of them had already experienced conflict and trauma. They also mentioned how people seeking international protection had been assaulted in racially motivated attacks when they were living in tents on the streets of Dublin. In addition, injustices within the system were noted, including inequity in the reception conditions afforded to Ukrainians and to people seeking international protection within the same accommodation centre.

Concerns regarding societal attitudes towards people from displaced backgrounds were also raised by participants from the Volunteer Centres. One spoke of their work in developing the 'Thrive' programme which seeks to engage displaced people in volunteering and to support organisations working with them. This participant acknowledged that sometimes organisations were reluctant to take on volunteers from displaced backgrounds and felt this was due to 'a bit of fear and resistance to change'. They linked this reluctance to wider apprehension within Irish society, fuelled by misinformation spread on social media, which had led to hostility, particularly towards people seeking international protection. To counteract this, they mentioned a positive initiative taken by one local authority which provided accurate information about immigration through a fact sheet that 'outlined all the myths and misconceptions', saying this model could be followed nationwide.

Another participant noted how they put precautions in place to ensure the safety of volunteers from displaced backgrounds, given the risk of racial harassment. They also mentioned how additional barriers were created by organisations demanding 'vetting' for voluntary positions which do not require this procedure[4].

They pointed out that 'it is illegal to vet people for these kinds of roles' and viewed this attempt at exclusion based on race, gender, and migration status as a worrying reflection of attitudes within elements of existing communities. For instance, they talked about how some sporting organisations had 'thrown up every barrier possible' to engaging with men who are seeking international protection:

They said, 'Oh no, you know, we need more vetting'. And I said, 'Well, if you had young men from the local village wanting to join you, would you put that vetting in place for them? So why are you doing it for these?'

[4] Volunteer Ireland state that Garda Vetting is only required for roles which involve 'the person having access to, or contact with, children or vulnerable persons' https://www.volunteer.ie/garda-vetting/

In addition, they mentioned how they and other individuals from supportive organisations had been targeted on social media for their work with displaced people. In response, they stressed the need to counter racism and divisive discourse by:

> **On the ground, building relationships, dispelling fear of people, just allowing somebody to engage, to work with them, to sit beside them on the bus […] not allowing the amount of misinformation and fearmongering.**

The participant from the education sector also expressed the view that higher education institutions should be more proactive against racism and cognisant of the welfare of all students. They said that efforts were required to make 'a very welcoming statement', especially in wake of the riots in Dublin in November 2023.

Nurturing inclusion

Supportive networks

The value of making connections was identified in this study as an important aspect of inclusion. Prominent issues raised by participants related to navigating life in Ireland, and support with accessing employment and education. The potential of volunteering in this regard is further explored in a short vignette at the end of this section.

Navigating a new society

A desire to make social connections in Ireland was evident in the focus groups with learners, for example, one participant talked about the challenge of developing 'contacts' and how they 'wanted to know more people'. Another spoke about their wish to engage in social activities based on shared interests, but they worried that Irish people may 'feel afraid to meet a foreigner'. Connections among displaced people were also valued. One participant said that learning about accommodation provision from more experienced peers had helped them navigate this complex system. Friendships within local communities were likewise mentioned as a support, for example, connections which developed through contacts with Irish neighbours.

Participants in the focus groups with volunteers also noted how the learners they had worked with were keen to make social connections and friendships in Ireland:

> **I had one learner in particular, every week I saw him it was 'how do I make friends here?'**

Another participant remarked that learners in their group 'want to literally just have a chat with someone'. Enabling 'chat' was also noted as a feature of the Housing Befriending Programme, with one volunteer who took part in this initiative saying that the social interaction it involved regarding accommodation and life in Ireland 'builds networks as well'.

In the interviews, participants from the NGO sector spoke about the role of local network-building in reducing 'alienation and isolation' and highlighted the value of meeting people through 'shared experiences'. One remarked that networking within migrant communities could be a source of 'comfort', although another warned that information exchange within informal peer networks could 'turn into a game of 'telephone'', losing accuracy as it spread.

These participants also noted that making connections could be a complex challenge for displaced people who may feel marginalised both within their cultural community and within Irish networks, for example, for individuals who identify as LGBT+. In addition, they stressed the value of intercultural support, including the appointment of integration officers by local authorities. One participant further suggested the provision of more formal instruction on cultural norms for people who are new to Ireland, while the need for intercultural training for those working with displaced people, particularly staff in accommodation centres, was also emphasised.

Participants from the Volunteer Centres discussed connections that can develop from volunteering. Two spoke from their own experiences about how volunteering had helped them to build networks in Ireland. The value of voluntary activities was highlighted as a means of meeting people within the local community and feeling welcome. One participant outlined how this had worked in a recent volunteering project with a community organisation:

They just provide tea and coffee so that we can get to know each other, to talk. And one of the volunteers, who used to be sleeping rough in the street, he said, 'this is the real Irish people that I was expecting when I was coming to Ireland'.

Another participant pointed out that volunteering can enable people to get to know others from different backgrounds living in the same centre and 'make networks with themselves'.

Inroads into employment and education

The importance of building networks was also evident regarding access to employment and navigating the education system in Ireland. In the focus groups with learners, one participant talked about how developing contacts within their professional field was essential yet challenging as they had 'no connections'. Another spoke about how they had established links through work, outlining the importance of getting a reference from employers. Aspects of employment culture in Ireland were brought up, with one participant commenting on how engagement in the conversation classes in Trinity College had raised their awareness of the job application process in Ireland:

We spoke about the job [...] we have a change of- exchange of experience, how to prepare, for example, for jobs and how to- how must be your behaviour on jobs interview.

Participants in the focus groups with volunteers also talked about how they tried to support learners in relation to accessing education and employment. One mentioned how they had simulated job interviews and provided their CV as a template for learners:

We even did a mock interview one week to try and ask them questions and engage in it, because they were quite curious as CVs depend on the country you're in.

Another raised the issue of awareness of labour law and felt it would be useful to develop contacts with providers of free legal aid to inform people about their employment rights, as they knew that some learners from the classes were 'working in conditions that aren't ideal and can be exploitative, because of status'. Participants again spoke of the challenges faced by learners in the classes regarding recognition of their qualifications, with one saying:

We've been asked multiple times, even in the English classes about like, how to- if they got a degree in their country how to then kind of transfer.

This participant explained how they had directed learners to expert guidance provided by organisations which had presented at the information events on education and employment that were organised as part of the classes. However, they were aware that the information delivered in these sessions or available online could be complex and difficult to navigate.

In the interviews, participants from the Volunteer Centres talked about how volunteering could be a 'stepping stone' to finding work in Ireland. Some of these participants had come from displaced backgrounds and viewed their previous voluntary work as an asset in securing their current employment. One spoke about how people who had been taken on as volunteers were sometimes retained as employees and how this could be mutually beneficial as 'organisations are gaining skills, organisations are benefiting from all these people'. However, another participant noted that, while volunteering could enable people to enter employment, initial jobs did not necessarily reflect people's skill sets. Nevertheless, links between volunteering and accessing work of relevance to people's own fields were also highlighted. One participant talked about how, through volunteering, a photographer was provided with opportunities and resources 'to show people how good they are'.

The participant from the education sector pointed out the need for 'long term' planning which could enable people to access higher education, saying that this could involve English language courses followed by a further education and training (FET) programme which 'opens up the right progression pathways'. They therefore felt that raising awareness of relevant FET pathways would be useful. This participant also outlined how students from displaced backgrounds could be supported in higher education, for example, through the provision of an initial foundation year. In addition, they called for awareness of trauma when engaging with students who have experienced forced displacement:

> **So many of the students are carrying huge trauma […] and there needs to be a recognition that the burden that they're carrying is very heavy.**

They talked about how this could impact students' educational progression, saying that there must be 'flexibility and an acknowledgement that sometimes it's really difficult for them to engage'. They emphasised the need for allies, including proactive college tutors and people in designated positions such as the roles of University of Sanctuary Officer and Mature Student Officer, to support students from displaced backgrounds. Overall, they felt more could be done within higher education at a national level to advocate for students who have experienced forced displacement and to provide additional scholarships in this area.

Vignette A: Volunteering

Many participants in the focus groups with learners spoke about volunteering as a way of making connections which could be useful, particularly in terms of accessing employment. One said:

> **When I arrived in Ireland, I think, 'what do I need to do, how I find a job?' And one of my friends advised me to be volunteer, because she told me, maybe you have no any job experience here and you can find a job.**

Some had taken on volunteer roles such as helping with sporting activities and community events, working in a charity shop, and assisting in the accommodation centre in which they lived. A number had provided linguistic support as volunteers, through interpreting and translation, language tutoring, and a multilingual mobile library initiative.

As well as the possible advantages of volunteering in relation to seeking work in Ireland, participants also spoke about its social aspect. For example, one talked about taking part in a community garden project. They highlighted how their volunteering experience helped them to develop a sense of belonging through 'serving the community'. They also said that they found this activity 'very relaxing', pointing to the mental health benefits of engaging in voluntary work. They further noted that meeting local people through volunteering had helped them to develop their language skills:

Now I understand the communication. Now I can say I've improved because of working in the community.

Another participant agreed, saying that volunteering at events 'helped me to improve my English, and if you have a real conversation, a live conversation, you can learn better'. However, they commented on barriers they had encountered when they applied for a volunteering position which required Garda Vetting. This proved a significant obstacle for them as they said it was 'a long procedure, and it takes a long, long time'.

By the time of this study, four of the participants had started to volunteer with the English conversation classes in Trinity College, assisting learners at lower proficiency levels. One talked about how they found this enjoyable and proposed further voluntary projects which could bring learners with similar interests together. Another spoke about how their volunteering on this programme and with other informal English classes had enabled them to attract new learners from a similar linguistic and cultural background as themselves.

Some participants in the focus groups with volunteers mentioned their involvement in additional voluntary initiatives. One had helped to organise solidarity dinners with people from displaced backgrounds. Another, who had also taken part in the Housing Befriending Programme, spoke about the emotional impact of volunteering in this field and how it made them aware of the challenges faced by displaced people in Ireland:

It's really hard what you hear in the Housing Befriending Programme because there's people that are being moved the whole time.

In the interviews, the potential of volunteering to enable the development of supportive networks was discussed in greater depth with participants from the Volunteer Centres. One participant explained how the 'Thrive' programme engages with displaced people and organisations seeking volunteers across Dublin. They talked about how this programme offers information and training for organisations in relation to inclusive recruitment, cultural awareness, the international protection system, and unconscious bias, and provides support to overcome challenges, for example, regarding roles which require Garda Vetting. They stressed the 'two-way' nature of the Thrive programme and how it involves 'creating like a 50:50 where both organisations and volunteers are working together and benefiting from each other'. They also highlighted benefits of volunteering for the individuals involved:

It's been helping people get jobs, meeting people you know, exploring, assisting the mental health, you know, linking to the next step for your career […] So volunteering is very beneficial when it comes to integrating.

Two participants from the Volunteer Centres drew on their own experience of displacement to illustrate how volunteering could be important for mental health, particularly for people seeking international protection who could not access work. One expressed the view that 'volunteering is very therapeutic', an opinion shared by another participant who outlined how taking part in voluntary activities could have psychological benefits:

It's for your mental health, it's really important, you know. Sitting in these accommodation centres, surrounded by all these men, there is no privacy […] To be out there to help people, to engage, to do something meaningful, it's good for them.

This participant explained how some people may find it culturally difficult to open up about mental health issues and that volunteering gave people a means to do something psychologically positive for themselves by giving them a sense of 'purpose'.

Participants from the Volunteer Centres also emphasised the advantages for organisations which accept volunteers from displaced backgrounds. One pointed out that many volunteers come from highly educated backgrounds and are keen to share their skills, saying that 'organisations are benefiting from all this beautiful talent'. They also noted the capacity of the Thrive programme to alleviate concerns in relation to culture, language, or the fear of additional workload in managing volunteers from displaced backgrounds.

Another participant spoke about motivations for volunteering among the people they worked with, saying 'they want to be part of things, they want to give back, they want to use their time'. They also acknowledged that, within the international protection system, 'people are bored waiting to get leave to remain or for their work permit'. In addition, they spoke about the challenge of volunteer management, balancing the high demand for volunteering opportunities with the need to overcome barriers to engaging with displaced people. Participants from the Volunteer Centres gave examples of typical projects in which volunteers are involved, including environmental activities such as tree planting, clean-ups with the national Tidy Towns initiative, and stewarding at local events and cultural festivals. One emphasised the multifaceted value of volunteering on these projects:

So they apply, and they get a job. And so this where they, like, they engage into the community... this is one of the benefits that they get out of volunteering.

Challenges were also highlighted, for example, the risk of exploitative volunteering which could arise in organisations which are not part of the Volunteer Ireland regulated network. Inaccurate information that volunteering could impact international protection decisions was also identified as a concern. Supporting women, especially those with children, to engage in volunteering presented a further challenge due to childcare and cultural factors.

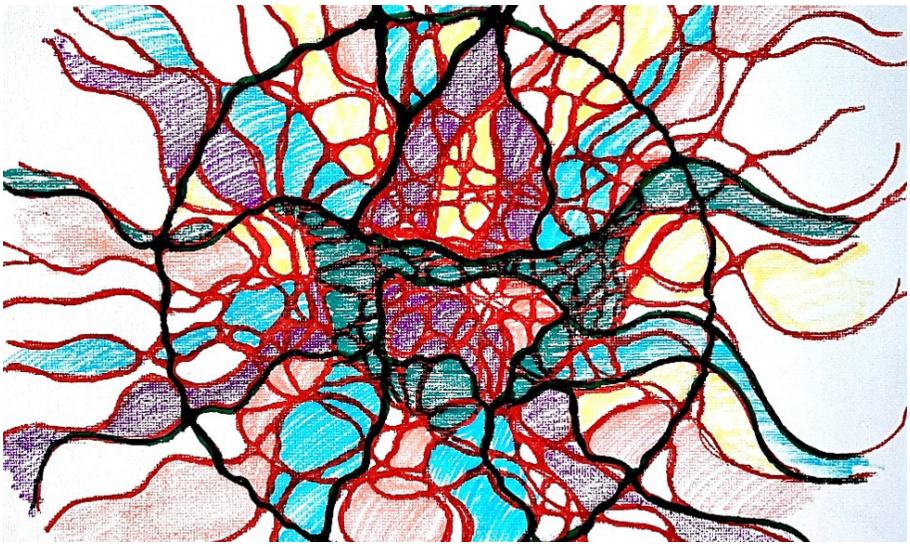
In terms of nurturing networks, one participant from the Volunteer Centres expressed the view that volunteering plays a role 'in terms of building networks within communities'. However, they also mentioned that additional support was required, particularly from local authorities, saying:

There's a lot more that can be done also, you know, like having local partnerships, having local authorities partnering and collaborating with volunteering.

Another participant acknowledged the support they had received from their local authority and stressed the need for sustained funding for volunteering programmes with people from displaced backgrounds. They emphasised that any funding for community initiatives must be accompanied by clear evidence of a commitment to inclusion, again expressing concern at the 'reticence of organisations to allow recently arrived migrants who they perceive are single, unvetted males' to engage in activities. They also stressed the need for 'visibility' in community-based initiatives involving volunteers from displaced backgrounds, explaining how this could counteract racialised false narratives:

It's just that positivity of seeing people out and about. I've seen people, though, uncomfortable that our team is so predominantly not Irish, traditionally looking Irish. But you can see people start to soften and realise this isn't as scary as it sounds.

Therefore, while participants acknowledged that network-building was ultimately 'down to the individual', nurturing inclusive environments through volunteering was viewed as a beneficial way of creating opportunities for supportive connections to develop.



Building inclusive communities

The study also highlighted issues regarding engagement with existing initiatives, awareness-raising in relation to supports for social inclusion, and the value of diversity as a feature of evolving communities.

Community initiatives

In the focus groups with learners, participants shared their knowledge and experience of engaging with initiatives and events in the community. One participant spoke of their role as a volunteer with two sporting initiatives which involve people from displaced backgrounds through running. They stressed the mental health benefits of taking part in physical activities in a context which also fosters social interaction. Another participant talked about feeling included in their local church community, particularly through intercultural cooking activities. Getting involved in local associations was mentioned by another participant, whose Irish neighbour enabled them to take part in a women's group, through which they were able to share their skills:

So, my neighbour invited me to a club for women and they have different sessions for different interests, and I even gave a workshop on crochet.

Links with existing community organisations were also suggested in the focus groups with volunteers, particularly in relation to sport. One participant advocated enabling people from displaced backgrounds to connect with sporting organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association and a Dublin football club with a strong record of anti-racism. In addition, they highlighted the potential of music, specifically choirs, as a space for creating community. Reflecting on their experiences with learners in the classes, they also noted that:

People are always very interested in 'how can I be Irish, how can I be more Irish?'

This issue of navigating identity was raised by several participants in the focus groups with volunteers, leading them to discuss concepts of 'Irishness'. One participant, who was not originally from Ireland, said they found Irish people rather 'insular' and pointed to the need for existing organisations to reach out to people from displaced backgrounds as ways of 'allowing them into the Irish community'.

In the interviews, participants from the NGO sector mentioned community-based initiatives which they felt could promote social inclusion. These included sporting organisations, a cycling project for women, the Men's Sheds Association, informal English conversation classes through the Fáilte Isteach network, and coffee mornings to enable mothers within the international protection system to connect with other women in the local area. They noted the important role played by community initiatives which often 'meet gaps in supports' that should be provided by the state. One participant also spoke about the value of community-based movements in countering racism and hostile narratives.

Participants from the Volunteer Centres highlighted the links they had established with organisations in the community, in particular through the Thrive programme, as one said:

The project is just to be like a middleman […] supporting volunteers and organisations to come together.

This participant explained how the Thrive programme tries to ensure that organisations which may be 'a bit sceptical' are guided to overcome apprehensions. Nevertheless, challenges remained, as another participant spoke about positive words but a lack of action among certain sporting organisations with regard to engaging with people who are seeking international protection. They again emphasised the mutual advantages of volunteering, both for the individuals and the community organisations involved, saying 'when they do open their doors to allow people in, they see the benefits themselves, the fears get dispelled'.

Communication and awareness of supports

The issue of awareness of potential supports for inclusion was also raised in this research. Participants in the focus groups with learners highlighted the need for multilingual, accessible information about community initiatives. One said that people would feel more comfortable if others from similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds could communicate this information as 'they think it's a more reliable source'. The participant who worked in the field of integration support pointed out that the people are often unaware of relevant services or initiatives within the community saying 'they don't have any idea about any type of organisations'. They recommended the provision of multilingual information, emphasising that in-person communication about services is important.

Similar perspectives were evident in the focus groups with volunteers in which participants also talked about how they had tried to find links to community initiatives which were relevant to learners' interests, for example, in the case of one newly arrived person:

I was, you know, showing him different social groups, social activities, hiking groups, we were on Eventbrite, looking at different things.

Participants noted that more awareness of 'refugee specific organisations' would be useful. They also said that information about outlets where newly arrived people could meet others and make friends might help, as one participant pointed out, 'if there's something there, we could signpost services' or 'networks that people could hook into'. Another suggested that 'an activities list' with links to a range of community-based initiatives could be beneficial, particularly for people who were still waiting on a work permit. Providing information about other English courses, both those provided by the ETBs and other informal classes, was likewise recommended.

In the interviews, participants from the NGO sector also raised issues regarding how information about supports is communicated to people from displaced backgrounds. One noted potential challenges in relation to accessing online information, asking:

> **Does somebody have this basic literacy skills to start with? Then do they have digital literacy skills? Do they have the language skills?**

Another commented on the lack of information and support provided for newly arrived people seeking international protection. They contrasted with the provision of multilingual information for people from Ukraine, as well as the additional funding which was made available to initiatives specifically aimed at supporting the social inclusion of Ukrainians.

Participants from the Volunteer Centres also highlighted the need for clear, multimodal communication regarding volunteering. They stressed the value of in-person communication through going to accommodation centres to inform people and offering hands-on support with registration on the I-VOL online system. One participant spoke about how the Thrive programme website also informs organisations, and how they engage directly with interested partners to provide tailored support. The need to share positive stories emerging from volunteer programmes involving displaced people was further emphasised as a response to negative and false narratives about immigration. In addition, one participant recommended the recruitment of 'community champions', respected figures within local communities who could counter misinformation and help with building 'community networks and making them work'. They also noted the role of academic research in this field, advising that it should be made more publicly accessible and comprehensible so that it could help 'people to really understand what is going on out there in the world'.

Issues relating to awareness of pathways towards further and higher education were also raised. The participant from the education sector spoke about the potential of liaising with the conversation classes to do workshops on FET routes into higher education. They also noted the value of 'community learning fairs, community mentoring' as effective ways of communication. However, conscious of the constraints on eligibility for higher education, they cautioned that any information provided must be clear in relation to existing restrictions as 'it's not fair to sell someone some dream that they can't access'.

Diversity as strength

Another key aspect of building inclusive communities which was evident from this study related to the concept of diversity as an asset and a fundamental element of social inclusion. As discussed in relation to volunteering, many participants in the focus groups with learners used their multilingual competence as a support for the inclusion of others from their linguistic and cultural communities. One participant also expressed their interest in sharing their multilingual and pedagogical skills with people in Ireland:

> **For example, why not to found here, I know from Irish people who I'm speaking with, they would like to learn a little Ukrainian. We have so many teachers here, we can make a volunteer Ukrainian class here.**

They went on to propose a language exchange project through which learners from the classes could teach a wide range of languages to university students. This idea was also raised in the focus groups with volunteers with one participant mentioning that such a project had been suggested by the learners they had worked with in the classes:

> **I think it would be a good idea to do a sort of language café, because obviously they need to learn English, but a lot of their language skills, we would need as well, like Arabic, Ukrainian or Spanish.**

Other volunteers agreed that a language exchange project could be mutually beneficial, saying that it 'would reduce this feeling of hierarchy' by challenging the dominance of English and flipping roles to allow learners to become teachers of their own languages, which could 'put people on a more equal footing'. Opportunities to introduce people to Irish were also suggested:

> **My friend, one of the volunteers, she speaks Irish fluently, and she was able to come over and talk a bit in Irish, and it was just so cool.**

In the focus groups with learners, participants also raised the possibility of sharing skills among people from different backgrounds, for example, through volunteering on cultural projects. Cultural diversity was also highlighted as an asset, considering participants' funds of knowledge and their international experience. One participant who described themselves as a 'global citizen', spoke of this as a resource 'that can be very useful for the society'. Another pointed to cultural diversity as a vital feature of contemporary Ireland, saying 'it's a rainbow nation because we find everyone from any country.' The advantages of inclusion for Irish society were thus emphasised, for example, one participant said that enabling people from displaced backgrounds to access employment could have benefits for the economy.

In the interviews with people working in the Volunteer Centres, the value of linguistic and cultural diversity was also stressed. One participant noted how having multilingual volunteer staff could be beneficial for organisations. Another identified their own multilingualism and their experience of displacement as factors which enabled them to support others with volunteering. The valuable work of volunteer translators was also highlighted. In addition, participants remarked on the intercultural exchange which was part of some of the community activities they facilitated, for example, Halloween celebrations involving volunteers from displaced backgrounds. The concept of social contribution was also apparent in these participants' discussion of volunteers' motivation, as one said:

> **This is the only thing that they always keep saying that 'we want to give back to the community, because we were received by this country. We want to give back. We want to show them that we are good people, that we like to engage, to fit in the society'.**

Cultural pathways

This study identified potential pathways towards social inclusion through culture and the arts, based on participants' perspectives regarding cultural encounters and aspects of creative expression. Findings in relation to the NGI art workshop series are presented as a short vignette at the end of this section.

Cultural encounters

Participants in the focus groups with learners reflected on their experiences of cultural institutions and activities in Ireland. The cultural tours organised through the classes were very positively received. For instance, participants remarked that visits to the Trinity Old Library and Book of Kells exhibition were 'amazing' and a chance to 'learn about the Irish culture'. Several participants also mentioned taking part in the tours organised in collaboration with the National Gallery of Ireland. One said they found the gallery 'very interesting', while another expressed their surprise when they discovered that individuals could visit the gallery free of charge.

Participants agreed that there should be 'more excursions' as they felt these were ways of engaging with culture, traditions, and other aspects of Irish society, as one said:

> **In relation to the Irish culture, I think the Irish culture is very rich. And I wish there were more events. So we could know about.**

They also proposed additional cultural activities, for example, visits to museums to learn about history. One participant noted how this could promote social inclusion and 'help us just to feel we are involved with people.'

The role of human connections and the sharing of cultural knowledge in a more general sense, beyond focused activities or events, was also viewed as important. One participant expressed how this could help people to adjust to life in Ireland:

> **Being in Ireland, like here everything is so new and even the weather it just kills you. But we've got people who help us with not getting in the holes and learning the culture of Ireland.**

Participants in the focus groups with volunteers were also aware of their learners' interest in discovering more about Irish life and culture. They discussed how this was perceived as a pathway towards inclusion and, again, how it linked to concepts of 'Irishness'. As one noted:

> **People, my groups that I've noticed, have all been really interested in Irish culture, and figuring out how to be more Irish is like the main kind of interest that I've noticed, and how to integrate the most.**

Creative expression and opportunities through the arts

Some participants in the focus groups with learners talked about their own experiences of working in the arts and how they engaged in creative expression in Ireland. One participant, a musician from Ukraine, mentioned how they had organised concerts and 'other charity projects or fundraising projects' in Ireland since their arrival. They emphasised the importance of collaboration with musicians from Ireland and other countries:

> **This is also one of my ideas, to get people, to let the people to be together to exchange their traditions, to get integrated into each other's cultures.**

They suggested that such projects could incorporate, for example, literature or choreography. Another participant spoke about how they had organised a series of drama workshops which had involved both people from displaced backgrounds and Irish people. They viewed the arts as a way of bringing people together and pointed to how multimodal creative expression can overcome linguistic barriers and enable shared cultural experiences.

The role of art in resistance was also raised by one participant, a singer, who had faced oppression due to the perceived political nature of their music. They explained how the authorities in their home country had censored their artistic expression:

> **They make me many problems no television, no radio, no speak, no talk. You have to shut up. 'You want to sing? Just about love… don't make the politic, don't tell to the people this, this, this'. It's a big problem.**

This testimony serves as a stark reminder of the socio-political context of art and how artists can be persecuted for their work if it does not conform to the strictures of oppressive regimes. The concept of art as a means of building resilience was also evident in suggestions for the possible development of arts-related activities through the conversation classes. These ideas highlighted the need for artists from displaced backgrounds to be supported to build networks and for opportunities to enable them to develop their practice, find work in their field in Ireland, and bring their creativity to the Irish public.

Vignette B: NGI art workshop series

Links between the conversation classes and the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI) have resulted in several guided tours for learners since 2023. Building on this collaboration, an art workshop series for learners attending the classes was designed by the NGI. This comprised four weekly sessions, each 90 minutes long, delivered by an artist educator in spring 2024. The workshops involved a sketching tour in the gallery, followed by a combination of gallery engagement and studio work on print design and collage. Ten places were available on this programme and four of these attendees participated in one of the focus groups which specifically concerned the art workshop series. All participants in this focus group were Ukrainian women, three were attending the Beginner class at the time of this study, while the fourth was in the Intermediate level class. This focus group was conducted through Ukrainian, Russian, and English. The artist educator was also interviewed as part of this research. The findings from the analysis of this data highlight issues in relation to nurturing creativity, art and resilience, art and language, and authentic engagement.

Nurturing creativity

Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment was a key aim of the art workshop series. Participants in the focus group talked about bonding as a group and fostering connections:

> **It was very pleasant to get together, to be together, to chat. It was like building a bridge of friendship... I had a great art connection.**

The artist educator also spoke about an atmosphere of cohesion and 'familiarity' within the group which they observed from the outset of the programme, and how they felt this enabled the workshops to become 'a very welcoming space'.

One participant in the focus group reflected on how the careful and sensitive organisation of each session helped to reduce their inhibitions, explaining that the workshops offered them a 'mind-blowing' first time experience of engaging with art. They acknowledged how they were surprised at their own creativity:

> **To be honest, I was shocked. And the fact that I could create something. And I was really amazed that I had the result, and it was really good.**

Likewise, another expressed their initial apprehension, saying 'I'm not a painter and not an artist, I wasn't sure if I can do something'. However, a participant who had more experience in the field reassured them that 'every person is an artist'.

Participants, particularly those who were new to art, captured the pride they took in their work. One said that they sent pictures of their artwork 'to everyone who I knew, to my friends, to my children, to my landlady, to everyone'. Some of the participants in this focus group were older people and the idea of art as an intergenerational connection was apparent. One talked about how they could pass on the skills they learned in the workshops:

> **I know now at least four techniques which I can do now, and I can even teach my grandchildren and share my experience.**

Art and resilience

Links were also made between art and individual conceptualisations of history and culture. Participants in this focus group spoke about how they and others involved in the programme incorporated aspects of Ukrainian culture into their art, with one saying that they wanted to be 'connected to Ukrainian theme'. The artist educator also noted how the workshop attendees included culturally significant elements in their artwork, saying that this was spontaneous and 'came from their own desire'. They viewed this channelling of cultural expression through art as a way in which attendees demonstrated agency in the workshops and a 'bridge' that connected them with their homeland. It also raised the idea of art as a cultural touchstone and source of resilience within the context of forced displacement.

Participants in this focus group also spoke of the emotional impact of making art. One said, 'it's very emotive, expressive', and described how 'the experiences are created through hands, through emotions'. Another agreed that this physicality enabled them to connect with the activity on a more emotional or spiritual level:

> **Everything that we were doing with hands, it was going through ourselves, through our hearts, through our soul.**

The small group setting was also viewed as valuable as it enabled peer support and created a secure and peaceful space in which attendees could feel at ease, as one participant remarked:

> **This atmosphere of calmness, I think that psychologically it's very important. When we realised how profoundly everything was organised, how much effort people put in it to create it, to gather us. In the process I was calm.**

The artist educator emphasised that the programme 'wasn't art therapy', its focus was purely on making art. However, they said that some attendees had spoken about the emotional relief they gleaned from the workshops, observing that 'a few of them had mentioned that it felt therapeutic, and it was like an escape.' The possible role of art in fostering resilience in situations of forced displacement could thus be explored in future projects.

Art and language

The potential for language learning through cultural engagement was apparent from the findings. One participant in the focus group talked about how they 'wanted to learn something in English through the prism of art' and how they were able to remember new words associated with their experiential practice in the workshops. The kinaesthetic and visual nature of learning in the workshops and their immersive approach may thus have enabled language acquisition. However, the challenges associated with engaging in the art workshops through the medium of English were also highlighted, as one participant said, 'it was really scary for me, mostly because of the language barrier'. They also suggested that some linguistic supports would have been useful, for example, vocabulary resources on upcoming workshop content.

The artist educator also commented on how language was 'the biggest hurdle' and how some ideas could get 'quite literally lost in translation'. They explained how they used demonstration and visuals and how they reduced their pace of speaking to enhance comprehension. However, they emphasised that the workshops were about making art, saying 'you don't need proficiency in English for that'. As a result, they felt that linguistic issues were not something that 'impacted negatively on anybody's experience'. They also mentioned that peer support was often available through a 'common language'. This was because most of those who attended the workshops were Ukrainian, despite the fact that the series had been advertised multilingually to all learners enrolled in the conversation classes, with places allocated on a first come, first served basis. While this linguistic connection proved useful during the workshops, group composition could be reviewed in any future projects of this nature to ensure greater diversity.

The artist educator also felt that a more multilingual and intercultural approach could possibly be adopted in relation to programme design, referencing other initiatives led by artists from migrant communities. This could give artists from displaced backgrounds the opportunity to practice in Ireland and could make such programmes more inclusive, 'so it doesn't feel like somebody's parachuting in'. One of the participants in the focus group gave an example of a literature initiative in which they had participated, illustrating how multilingual approaches could be applied:

> **We start write different type of book: novels, fantasy, documentary. Half members use Ukrainian language, half members use English language.**

Challenge of authentic engagement

The importance of avoiding tokenism when engaging through the arts with people who have experienced forced displacement was discussed by the artist educator:

> **More marginalised communities might feel like they're being targeted to meet numbers and to meet kind of diversity. So I think it's a very sensitive area to, you know, for them to not feel like they're a token.**

They talked about the need for a 'holistic' culture of inclusion through all facets of cultural institutions, to ensure that people feel welcome and supported in what they referred to as the 'wayfinding' process of engagement. They expressed their vision of 'the gallery as a place of sanctuary and kind of self-actualisation' and how this was something they sought to realise with the attendees in the workshops. They also raised the issue of connecting with communities, observing that, while some attendees in the workshops were already familiar with the artworld, the gallery could be perceived as 'quite inaccessible to individuals.'

Regarding further steps to overcome obstacles to engagement, the artist educator suggested culturally sensitive approaches which pro-actively reached out to communities, saying:

> **I think there is something, the initiative coming from the gallery, but it's going into their space, and, you know, inviting them in and kind of building that trust.**

They also highlighted the value of raising awareness about the wide variety of free of charge events offered by the NGI and said that they had recommended a national artists' network to some of the workshop attendees who wanted to pursue artistic pathways in Ireland. Considering the development of future programmes, both the artist educator and the participants in this focus group proposed an extended schedule, beyond four sessions, which would allow more time for community building and opportunities for deeper engagement with various forms of creative expression.

Learning and sharing

Creating a community of learning

The role of the University of Sanctuary conversation classes in Trinity College Dublin as a community of learning was evident from the findings of this study. This sense of community was apparent in the programme's capacity to foster welcome and belonging, in features of the learning environment that were viewed by participants as inclusive, and in how the classes enabled network-building through personal connections and outreach activities.

Welcome and belonging

Participants in the focus groups with learners spoke about the welcoming nature of the classes. One expressed how this initiative opened the doors of the university to them, saying that the classes gave them 'confidence to enter the Trinity, to have friends inside'. Others captured this sense of inclusion, for example, commenting that 'here in Trinity I find that you accept me', describing the classes as a place in which 'everyone is welcome', and saying that those involved 'are always nice'. The diversity among learners and volunteers was also regarded as a beneficial aspect of the classes:

> **It's like where Trinity classes really can help. Because it's like, when you speak with a lot of people you can meet like people from all around the world.**

A key factor in this positive impression of the classes related to the supportive role of volunteers. Participants described the volunteers they had worked with as 'excellent', 'very polite', 'so kind' and, as one mentioned, a 'fantastic teacher'. In addition to supporting language learning, it was felt that the volunteers created a safe and secure community and a place of belonging. As one participant said of their volunteer, 'I was really happy with her because I feel comfortable. We can talk about any subject we want'.

This development of trust was also noted in the focus groups with volunteers. One participant spoke about a learner they had worked with during the classes, explaining that this woman, who was at a very early stage of English language acquisition, initially 'looked fearful' but her trust began to grow. They outlined how a bond had developed between them, saying that 'the way she flourished and she opened up and improved was touching'. Another participant talked about friendships that developed among learners and how the classes became a place of belonging where 'they would meet their friends'.

One of the interview participants from the Volunteer Centres also remarked on positive feedback they had heard from people on their programmes who attended the conversation classes in Trinity College. They said that they recommended the classes as 'really good' and talked about how people valued attending. In particular, they felt the classes helped people's self-esteem and gave them the feeling of being 'worth something'. They commented on how taking part in this initiative could promote well-being:

> **It's really important in terms of maybe for their mental health, how they see themselves […] that you have this class […] you come, you have a friend here. So you feel like you belong to this society.**

Inclusive learning environment

Language development

The inclusive nature of the environment was evident from the focus groups with learners in which participants noted aspects of the classes which they felt were beneficial for their English language learning. They commented on the interactive nature of the classes and their focus on informal conversation within a social environment, as one participant said:

> **It was great volunteer, good courses. It helps me because I have a live conversation between people from another country and native English speakers.**

Another participant highlighted how they felt the classes were not only an environment in which to learn English but also that they facilitated their 'movement towards integration into Irish society'. The learner-centred approach and the informal structure of this conversation-focused programme was viewed as a means of enhancing learners' confidence and reducing apprehension in relation to language learning. One participant shared that they had been 'afraid to speak, to make mistake' but these fears were eased by 'engaging in conversation'. The role of volunteers in supporting English language development in the classes was emphasised, as one participant said, 'my teacher helped me a lot in the English classes, and I can understand a little bit now'. Another participant gave examples of the types of activities they engaged in with their volunteers, for example, playing board games, and how they found these useful.

In the focus groups with volunteers, participants also noted ways in which they had supported their learners' English language development. Participants who had worked in the Beginner class talked about how they were guided by the individual learner's pace and how repetition was important. The role of translanguaging, recognising learners' multilingual identities and using their linguistic knowledge as a resource, was evident in some of the approaches adopted to supporting English language development. One participant recounted how translanguaging worked with a learner who was very new to English:

> **Luckily, she had pictures that she could translate into Persian, which really, really helped. So she was in a way helping me to help her.**

This example also demonstrates learner agency and the need for volunteers to respond to individuals' preferred approaches to language learning. Participants also commented on their learners' motivation, as one said, 'they're literally hungry for learning'. A similar metaphor was used by a participant in the focus groups with learners who called for more frequent classes, saying 'you feel you are thirsty, you want to get more and more'.

Intercultural understanding

Another feature of the learning environment was the intercultural aspect of the classes and how this was perceived as being mutually beneficial for both learners and volunteers. This intercultural dimension was seen to align with learners' needs, as one participant in the focus groups with learners said, 'I want to learn about your culture and your countries'. Another commented on how the classes often marked cultural occasions, such as Ramadan, and how this could be expanded to cover other events and festivals.

Participants in the focus groups with volunteers also spoke about how they frequently discussed aspects of culture in the classes. For example, one participant said they often talked about food, 'because it is such a great thing and a great cultural way to share ideas'. The mutual learning associated with the classes and the sense of fulfilment which volunteers derived from these intercultural encounters was thus apparent:

It's one of those experiences where you get more than what you gave, so I totally enjoyed it.

Another participant spoke about how the classes were 'such a fruitful experience' and how interacting with learners left them 'filled with so much joy in my heart'.

Network-building through the classes

Developing links

Some participants in the focus groups with learners mentioned how they made connections in the classes and became more aware of aspects of life in Ireland, as one said:

I was able to develop a lot of connections with people, so we talked a lot about accommodation, about education system.

One participant referred to the classes as an 'intermediary of everything' and a way of making connections with the wider community. Another felt the links that they established in the classes had helped them to obtain employment. In particular, they noted the supportive efforts of one volunteer with whom they had kept in contact:

And actually, because she gave me this big support, these days I work with the government, here in Ireland.

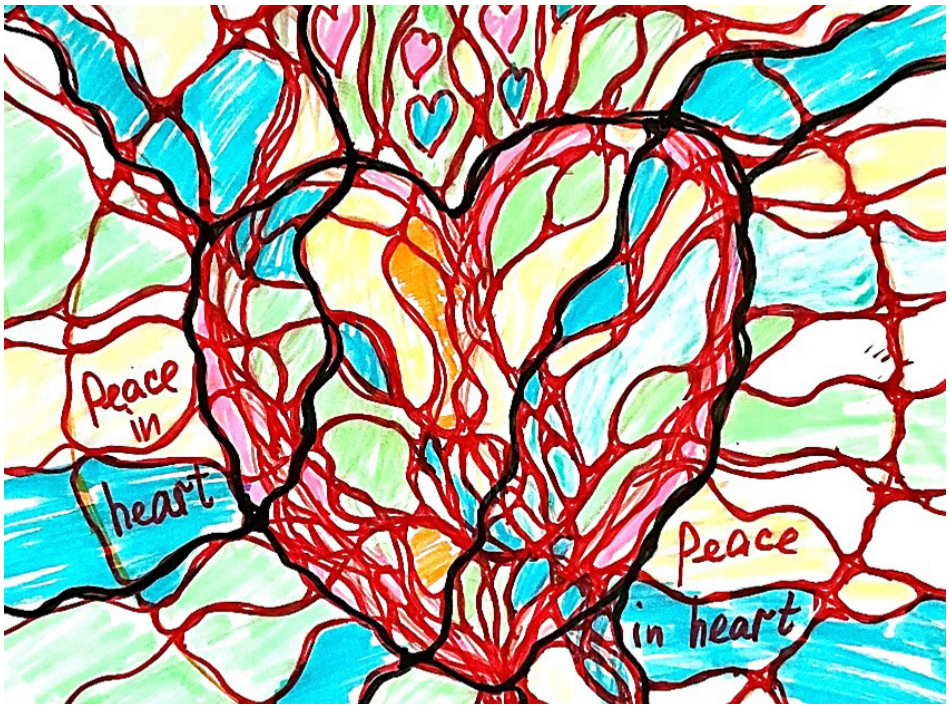
Participants also shared their thoughts on how the conversation classes could further promote the development of connections among learners. One proposed that the classes could enable additional network-building by developing some form of database through which learners could share their professional skills and 'help each other as a volunteer'. A similar suggestion was made by another participant who said that this could help people to collaborate, for example, to make a cultural performance. Enabling connections among learners was an issue also raised within the focus groups with volunteers. One participant wondered if there was some way through the classes in which it may be possible to 'facilitate the connections between peers'. Another reflected on how people could be supported with building professional networks, through matching learners and volunteers with similar professional or academic experience.

Outreach events

As evident in participants' discussion of cultural encounters, additional activities organised through the classes in collaboration with cultural institutions proved popular among learners. Information events, organised as part of the classes, which focused on accessing further and higher education, employment, and volunteering, were also positively received. These events were viewed as useful by participants in the focus groups with learners, with one calling for further networking opportunities through which people could obtain information on specific areas of employment. Additional ideas for supporting access to education were also shared, for example, one participant suggested:

I think it would be a good idea if they brought somebody who was maybe a former asylum seeker or refugee, and who could eventually access university to come and explain how they did it.

Participants in the focus groups with volunteers also felt that these information events were relevant and interesting and that they 'addressed many different needs'. However, one observed that the format could include more 'interactive activity' considering the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by learners. Another noted the value of one-to-one communication and the need for individual guidance regarding employment or education.



Enhancing the learning experience

Ideas for language learning

Participants in the focus groups with learners also provided suggestions on how to enhance the language learning experience within the classes, with one advocating the use of 'templates with words, with questions, with phrases' as a scaffold for learners with lower levels of proficiency in English. At higher proficiency levels, another participant expressed the need for English for academic and professional purposes and 'more about grammar'. The use of a range of media was also recommended, with two participants suggesting activities based on watching films. Participants in the focus groups with volunteers also shared some ideas for activities, for example, one suggested storytelling as a way of 'building a sense of community'.

Responding to challenges

The main challenges raised regarding the classes concerned frequency and physical space. One participant in the focus groups with learners felt that the classes could be more frequent as 'one lesson per week it's not enough', they also noted that some of the classrooms were small, noisy, and lacking ventilation. Another participant agreed:

Now this room is very small, and too loud inside. If you just talk all time, it's too loud […] It's one day a week, maybe we need more.

These structural limitations reflected issues in relation to finding adequate classrooms due to the lack of available space on campus and the demand for the classes. Other challenges identified by participants could, however, be overcome through volunteer training. In the focus groups with volunteers, one participant noted the increased opportunities for training since the classes had joined the Fáilte Isteach national network in 2023. This meant that volunteers could access a wide range of online training sessions offered by Fáilte Isteach as well as the in-house training provided as part of this programme. Nevertheless, some felt that additional training would be useful for volunteers, for example, to remind them of the trauma-informed approach adopted in the classes and the need for caution regarding sensitive topics.

Sustaining sanctuary

Findings in relation to the connections fostered through the classes, both within the university and with organisations in the community, highlight the multifaceted and mutually beneficial nature of university civic engagement with people from displaced backgrounds. They also point to further projects which could evolve from these conversation classes and the value of sustained engagement in this area. For example, the proposed language exchange activities, suggested in the focus groups with both learners and volunteers, could enhance university students' linguistic skills as well as recognising the multilingual expertise of people from displaced backgrounds. One participant in the focus groups with volunteers said they felt that connections should be made with relevant departments to realise this project. This demonstrates the potential of using networks within the institution, for example, by encouraging academics to collaborate on further projects emerging from links developed through the conversation classes.

Other proposals related to ideas for cultural events. For instance, the production of a performance involving people attending the classes was suggested in the focus groups with learners by two participants who had experience in the arts. The potential of the university to offer space in which to rehearse and perform was noted in this regard. One participant viewed such a collaboration as a reciprocal connection with the university:

Because Trinity helps us a lot to know each other, to do something to learn English, and many things. And general feeling of being comfortable, being comfortable here is very important. So why not to give something back?

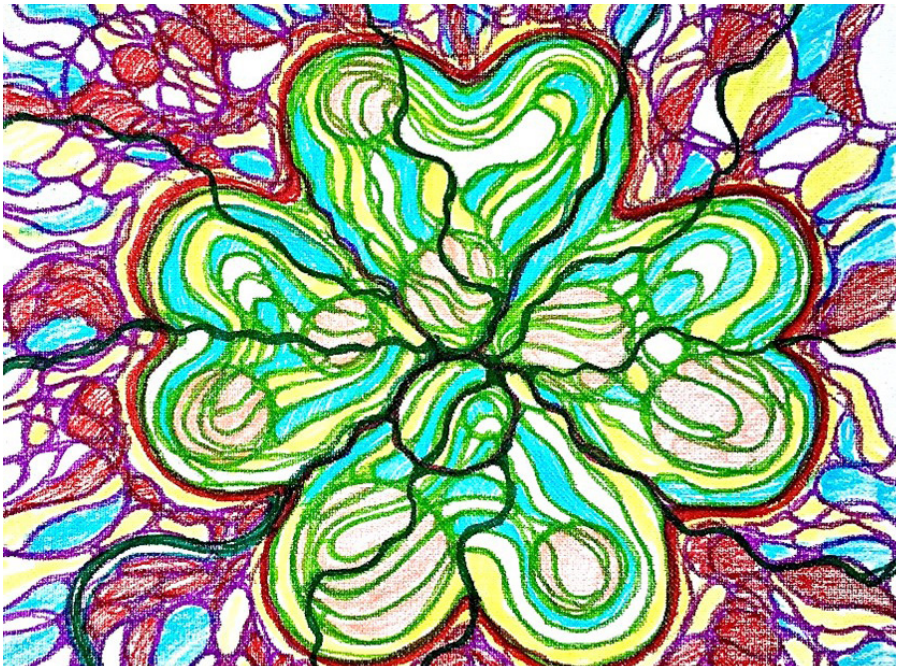
Participants who had attended the NGI workshops also shared their ideas regarding further projects which they felt could be developed in the area of the arts. They expressed their desire to learn more about art, history, language, and culture in Ireland. In relation to visual art, one participant spoke of their aspirations to conduct a workshop as a collaborative venture between the university and the gallery. Another talked about their experience of engaging with various cultural institutions, for example, a project which focused on literature and incorporated visits to galleries and museums. They proposed that a similar project could be conducted through collaboration with the classes in Trinity College.

In the focus groups with volunteers, further collaborations were also suggested, for example, making connections with the university library to facilitate activities such as a book club. Participants also noted the potential for links with student-led bodies, such as the national STAND organisation which promotes engagement on global justice, equality, and sustainability issues. They also mentioned collaborating with the Trinity Students' Union which had provided material support, such as coats and blankets, to people seeking international protection who were sleeping rough near the university in early 2024.

The development of civic engagement activities through links with the classes was also highlighted in relation to the Housing Befriending Programme, considering how it drew on common ground between university students and people exiting Direct Provision regarding seeking accommodation. One participant who had been involved in this befriending initiative emphasised the value of the programme in terms of practical support, the development of digital skills, and the exchange of cultural insights. They also recommended this programme as a beneficial learning experience for student volunteers.

As well as highlighting the challenges regarding access to higher education faced by people from displaced backgrounds, steps which could make the university more inclusive were proposed in the focus groups with learners. One participant suggested enabling access to academic events, such as conferences of relevance to their field. Another asked about access to the university's extra-mural courses. In the interviews, the participant from the education sector also noted the potential for further engagement with people attending the classes, for example, by enabling fee waivers for extra-mural courses. They also suggested the provision of interactive workshops in relation to longer term pathways towards further and higher education. In addition, they said that some kind of 'clinic or a workshop' could be organised to support parents of teenage children who may be nearing the end of their secondary education. This could enable parents to understand the Irish system regarding progression into higher education.

In terms of wider university engagement with students from displaced backgrounds, this participant emphasised the need for more scholarship places. They also recommended the provision of on-campus accommodation for students for the full duration of these programmes, and the inclusion of a foundation year as part of undergraduate scholarships. They highlighted the importance of key liaison personnel and the need for supportive tutors who are aware of the challenges which students from displaced backgrounds may face and who can respond to these issues in a trauma-informed manner. In addition, they noted that advocacy across the sector is required to make higher education more accessible for people from displaced backgrounds in Ireland.



Conclusion

Summary of findings

This study investigated barriers to social inclusion faced by people who have experienced forced displacement, focusing on issues in relation to language and education, employment, accommodation, and cultural engagement. It explored the role of social connections in responding to these challenges and building inclusive communities. It also considered how a university-based language and intercultural initiative with people from displaced backgrounds may enable the development of supportive networks.

The findings of this study highlight the need for urgent action regarding the reception of people from displaced backgrounds in Ireland. The experiences of homelessness, inadequate conditions in accommodation centres, and social isolation which are reported in this research reflect profound failings in the current state response. Differential approaches to the provision of accommodation based on migration status further demonstrate the unjust and racialised nature of the international protection system in Ireland (Lentin, 2022). This study also indicates that more support is required to enable displaced people to access employment and education, including greater recognition of previous qualifications and experience. Language has been identified in this research as another major challenge and one that intersects with other factors impacting social inclusion. The findings point to the need for a wider range of English courses, including for professional and academic purposes (Ciribuco et al., 2024). Issues raised in this study regarding racist incidents, fears of discrimination, intimidation inside and outside accommodation centres, and prejudice within communities provide further worrying evidence of racism and hostility towards people who have experienced forced displacement (Cannon & Murphy, 2024). The findings thus emphasise the need for information and support on a national and local level to counter false narratives, enable understanding, and nurture positive networks within communities.

This research also demonstrates the value of making connections as a means of navigating Irish society. It considers how such links may help with accessing employment. It also outlines how students from displaced backgrounds should be supported to enter and progress within higher education. The findings show the benefits of volunteering not only in relation to finding employment but also in enhancing wellbeing and fostering social networks (Wood et al., 2019; Scanlon & Martin, 2022). The study reports positive examples of community engagement, such as the Thrive programme which supports organisations to take on volunteers from displaced backgrounds. It also shows the need for clear and accessible communication to ensure that people are aware of relevant initiatives in the community and to enable engagement with these by establishing trust (Strang & Quinn, 2021). Linguistic and cultural diversity is highlighted in the research findings as a significant resource which can enrich communities. The value of engagement with the arts, considering how this can enable intercultural sharing, support inclusion, and build resilience is also evident, particularly in the findings in relation to the NGI art workshop series.

The findings also show how creating an inclusive environment for language learning and making social connections is an important aspect of the English conversation classes organised through the University of Sanctuary initiative in Trinity College Dublin. Other benefits of the classes identified by participants include mutual learning among both learners and volunteers. The study points to the potential for further projects, with proposals including language exchange sessions, a possible cultural performance, and initiatives engaging with visual art and literature. This research also emphasises the need to support access to education and the development of additional pathways into higher education for people from displaced backgrounds.

However, the limitations of this study must also be acknowledged as this was a small-scale project which could not cover all aspects of social inclusion. Further research is therefore required involving participants from a wider range of backgrounds across additional issues and sectors.

In terms of research impact, as a community-based participatory action research project, every effort has been made to apply the research findings to the ongoing development of this language and intercultural support programme in Trinity College. For example, since summer 2024, a sports event and cultural tours to the National Museum of Ireland and the Chester Beatty have been organised as part of the classes. Through links with Trinity Business School and the Community Mentoring programme, steps have been taken to ensure that events regarding employment and education are more interactive. Multilingual messaging, reaching out to people who may be experiencing homelessness, and the involvement of more volunteers from displaced backgrounds have also enhanced the programme. In addition, further opportunities for volunteer training have been made available through the Fáilte Isteach network. The programme thus illustrates the value of civic engagement with people from displaced backgrounds as a way of doing sanctuary that can nurture networks, promote mutual learning, and enable universities to become sites of welcome and inclusion.

Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the need for more humane policies in Ireland in response to forced migration, particularly regarding people who seek international protection. They show the positive role which community-based organisations can play in social inclusion and how higher education institutions have a responsibility to engage with displaced people. The following recommendations have therefore been made in relation to university civic engagement, based on this research emerging from the conversation classes in Trinity College Dublin:

Recommendations for the creation of sanctuary through university civic engagement

1. Create a welcoming and inclusive environment, be aware of how trauma may be exacerbated by reception conditions and other post-arrival challenges and injustices.
2. Promote civic engagement initiatives through multilingual and multimodal communication.
3. Recognise the mutual learning in volunteer-led language and intercultural support programmes and the benefits of such initiatives for university students and staff; create volunteering opportunities for people from displaced backgrounds.
4. Pursue interdisciplinary links to develop further activities, for example, in relation to supporting access to education and employment.
5. Link with other organisations working in the fields of integration support, education, and volunteering, as well as cultural and sporting initiatives; explore collaborative projects.
6. Provide more places, pathways, and support for people from displaced backgrounds to enter higher education, advocate for the recognition of previous qualifications.
7. Conduct further engaged research with people from displaced backgrounds and organisations in the community; provide evidence-based information to counter false narratives regarding forced displacement.

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