WNW Connect PATH 3 Overview 2021 - 2025



WNW Connect is a joint Higher Education Cluster Access project between ATU and University of Galway under Path 3 Funding, supporting regional and community partnerships to facilitate the attraction and retention of undergraduate students from target groups identified it the National Access Plan.



WNW Connect has made significant strides in widening participation and supporting underrepresented students through mentoring and outreach. The programme's achievements span student engagement, school and community partnerships, development of best practices, and strategic institutional change.

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Outcomes and Achievements

1. Student Engagement and Success

PATH 3 significantly enhanced student awareness, aspiration, and transition into higher education, particularly among underrepresented groups. Through mentoring and tailored programming, students gained confidence, explored academic and career options, and felt a stronger sense of belonging.

Key Outcomes and Examples:

- Increased Awareness and Aspiration: Campus exposure and mentoring boosted student confidence and motivation.
- **Mentor-Rich Environments:** Structured mentoring across schools, communities, and campuses fostered engagement.
- **On-Campus Experiences:** Programmes like Uni4U and the Radius Project offered immersive academic and career exploration.
- **Flexible, Interest-Based Programming:** Radius adapted mid-cycle to student interests, engaging 70 participants in hospitality and design.
- **Timely Outreach:** The FET2HE Programme aligned its delivery with student decision-making timelines, engaging 65 students in a four-week mentoring programme.
- **Peer and Staff Mentoring:** Foróige matched 147 students with university staff, supplemented by peer mentoring and monthly check-ins.
- **Support for Neurodivergent Students:** ADHD Learning Curve (ATU Donegal) provided coaching, assessments, and awareness resources.
- **Subject and Career Engagement:** Initiatives like *It's Not Just Science!* and *Strengths PATH* helped students align interests and strengths with future pathways.

2. Engagement with Schools and Community Groups

Strong partnerships with schools and community organisations were vital to PATH 3's impact in schools and communities. Schools, community groups, and other organisations in disadvantaged areas collaborated with HEIs to build a connected support system to improve student access, retention, and success.

Examples:

- **Uni4U:** Engaged 789 primary students and teachers from five DEIS and Link schools, culminating in a graduation ceremony.
- Cranmore Education Mentoring (ATU Sligo): Delivered mentoring to 87 community mentees and workshops to 454 students; trained 29 in Level 5 Community Mentoring & Advocacy.

- Ballybane Education Mentoring (ATU Galway Mayo): Supported 92 individuals and 43 community partners with daily guidance on pathways, CAO applications, and financial supports.
- **Cranmore and Ballybane** located ATU staff in the offices of community organisations thereby supporting the development of a connected support system for students.

3. Development and Dissemination of Good Practice Models

PATH 3 emphasised the creation and sharing of effective, research-informed mentoring models.

Examples:

- Mentoring for Access, Retention and Student Success (Brady et al., 2024): A comprehensive review involving 23 stakeholders.
- National and International Presentations: Showcased leadership at events like the European and US Mentoring Summits.
- Practical Tools: Resources were developed and reissued based on feedback including the Mentoring Journal and School Mentoring Handbooks and are available for ongoing use.

4. Diverse and Sustainable Mentoring Pathways

PATH 3 demonstrated the adaptability of mentoring to diverse learner needs, highlighting the importance of stable funding, staffing, and institutional support.

Examples:

- Foróige Third Level Mentoring: Matched 147 students with university staff mentors.
- Radius Project: Delivered hands-on workshops to 70 participants.
- **FET2HE Programme:** Engaged 65 students through early outreach.
- ADHD Learning Curve: Provided tailored support for neurodivergent students.
- It's Not Just Science!: Increased science engagement among male DEIS students, with a 61% rise in positive attitudes toward Biology.
- **Strengths PATH Programme:** Helped 481 students identify and align personal strengths with educational goals.

5. Traveller and Roma Engagement

PATH 3 marked a significant advancement in supporting Traveller and Roma participation in higher education across the Cluster. Through sustained collaboration with community organisations, schools, and education providers, a wide range of initiatives were developed

to build trust, raise awareness, and provide direct support to students and families. These efforts included tailored mentoring, academic support programmes, and culturally inclusive events, all aimed at improving visibility, engagement, and progression. The establishment of advisory groups, targeted outreach, and the integration of Traveller and Roma perspectives into institutional planning reflect a long-term commitment to equity and inclusion.

Examples:

- Over 300 in-person engagements with 27 external agencies.
- Programmes including taster sessions, summer camps, and tailored information reached 196 individuals (2021–2025).
- **Grinds4Mincéirs:** Supported 20+ students, with five progressing to further or higher education.
- Educational Transition Programme: Offered IT, academic, and wellbeing support to 15 participants.
- Weekly support provided to 19 undergraduate and Access students.
- Enhanced visibility through ATU's website, printed materials, and events like Traveller Ethnicity Week and "Traveller Success Stories in Higher Education."



Key Learnings

The PATH 3 programme has demonstrated the transformative potential of mentoring and outreach in widening participation in higher education. Through early engagement, strong community partnerships, inclusive practices, and strategic planning, the WNW Cluster has built robust understanding and evidence for future developments. Key learnings include:

1. Early and Timely Engagement

Early intervention—particularly before key educational transitions—is essential. Aligning outreach with students' decision-making timelines increases impact. Early exposure to higher education environments fosters familiarity, confidence, and aspiration among underrepresented groups.

2. Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Practices

Culturally sensitive, community-led approaches are vital, especially for Traveller, Roma, and other marginalised communities. Institutions must adapt to students' needs, ensuring visible cultural representation, emotional and financial supports, and inclusive systems that promote belonging.

3. Community Presence and School Partnerships

Sustained engagement with schools and communities builds trust and relevance. Embedding programmes within local contexts and fostering strong relationships with educators and families enhances participation and supports smoother educational transitions.

4. Sustainable Structures and Resources

Stable funding, consistent staffing, and institutional commitment are critical for long-term success. Dedicated roles and cross-sector collaboration ensure continuity, while accessible, tailored programming supports diverse learners effectively.

5. Strategic, Principles-Based Approaches

A shared, evidence-informed framework for access and widening participation initiatives enhances coherence and impact. Grassroots initiatives offer valuable insights and enhance institutional understanding of and contribution to the local community. Principles-based strategies helps unify efforts, support outcome measurement, and ensure alignment with institutional and national goals.

Recommendations for future of PATH 3

1. Strengthen Strategic Planning and Cross-Sector Collaboration

- Co-design projects from the outset with input from all stakeholders, including end users, to ensure relevance and shared ownership.
- Foster interconnectivity between projects and institutions to avoid duplication and maximise impact.

2. Expand Sustainable Pre-Entry Community and School Engagement

- Build on insights from PATH 3 to enhance pre-entry engagement across schools, FETs, and communities, tailoring activities to the needs of specific target groups.
- Develop digital pre-entry resources (e.g., "Getting Ready for College" online course) to support Leaving Certificate students.

3. Invest in Research, Evaluation, and Evidence-Based Practice

- Commission/collaborate in longitudinal research to track the long-term impact of early engagement, particularly from primary school onwards.
- Focus research on key transition points (e.g., Junior to Leaving Cert), especially for neurodivergent students.

4. Build Sustainably

- Invest in pre-entry and partnership work including dedicated staff and development of digital resources.
- Support teachers in their engagement with underrepresented pupils.
- Collaborate with academic staff and faculties to engage and support underrepresented students pre and post entry.

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