

Adult Continuing Education



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh



ADULT CONTINUING EDUCATION AT UCC

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Adult Continuing Education at UCC

2022 Edition



April 14 marked a very special day for Lyndsey El Amoud, UCC ACE assistant director, and her family. Not only were Lyndsey's husband, Tarik, and father, Ray, conferred with Postgraduate Diplomas but Lyndsey had the honour of calling the roll at their ceremony. "ACE will always be there at the very forefront in trying to push barriers out of people's way and knock walls down for people because the University should be open to everybody," says Lyndsey. Picture: Alana Daly Mulligan

Microcredential is the latest buzzword in higher education but with the tireless work being undertaken behind the scenes, it has the power to provide a lasting transformation in how learners interact with UCC.

Microcredentials are bite-sized one-to-30-credit courses delivered on a part-time basis. They allow returning learners to dip their toes in the water and gain a formal UCC award. They allow employees to gain specific skills for their work-

place. In the future, they will enable students to create a custom-made degree, even across different universities, stacking microcredentials together based on their own interests or needs to build a personalised qualification.

Perhaps some examples from UCC's earliest offerings are best to illustrate it.

There has been the Community-Based Mentoring programme, training and connecting communi-

ty workers around Cork. There's a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Certificate in Responding to Problem Gambling targeted at upskilling addiction counsellors in an issue that has mushroomed during COVID. For industry, there have been courses in Validation Science, Project Management, and Biopharmaceutical Technologies – short, specific bursts of knowledge – with more to come on Artificial Intelligence and Small and Medium Enterprises.

'We're really giving the whole education system a bit of a *shake*'

"The first ones were approved back in 2020," says Lyndsey El Amoud, UCC ACE assistant director. "One of the companies we were working with at the time was a big Cork company and they were dealing with a lot of redundancies on the site. We were using the microcredential to upskill people in another area so that they would be more employable and they would be able to find other employment quicker if they so wanted.

"That was a tough experience in some ways because these people faced into losing jobs that they had worked in for 10, 15, 20 years but then you were dealing with them afterwards as they report back to us how happy they are that they found new jobs in other companies.

"Being able to go from facing into unemployment to very quickly being back in the workplace because of a 12-week course that helped them upskill into something else, that's very rewarding. All of our work in ACE is rewarding because we always feel we're making a difference in people's lives and that's what motivates us to try and change the world one step at a time."

'We need this now'

ACE's focus isn't just on industry. They don't concentrate on any one type of learner. Anybody who wants to learn is a learner whose needs ACE will aspire to meet, says Lyndsey.

"Our approach to developing microcredentials is very similar to how we approach everything in ACE. We're really trying to respond to demand and a need identified on the ground, whether that's by a community group or an industry or a sector. It's all about us meeting people where they are, not us trying to create something and then sell it to the masses.

"On our side, it's very fast-paced. Typically, you might have a year's lead in to a new course in UCC or even two years in some cases. But for us, we might have a company or a group that come to us for a microcredential and they're saying this is an urgent need on the ground – 'We need this now' – and we're trying to turn that course around in maybe six weeks and be ready to take people in. It's a very dynamic space for us and there's just more and more and more coming all the time."

Lyndsey mentions another two courses going forward for internal approval by UCC the following week: Building Workplace Resilience and Workplace Change – both responding to the demands of industry during COVID.

The biggest challenge in all of this? "Trying to keep pace with our own ideas," says Lyndsey.

Mags Arnold, UCC project lead on the Irish Universities Association's €12.3m MicroCreds project, underlines the change in approach that universities are taking.

Continued on Page 2

**'It made me see
Cork with new eyes'**

Community Support Page 10

**Fascists, communists,
and diplomats**

*The politics of UCC's first adult
education course Page 12*

**"Ukraine now needs the
support of the world."**

*The human cost of a war
against war Page 20*

Cover Story Continued

“We’re looking at building programmes in reverse. The traditional way in a university of developing a programme is you look at what you want from the programme and then you see what blocks you need to make it, whereas we’re looking at what the gaps are in industry or in people’s education and building those individual blocks and seeing how we can make them into something bigger.

“Another part of the project is working with business and asking them what they need from us. Traditionally, universities would say, ‘Here’s what we want to offer,’ rather than, ‘What do you want?’ That’s the mind-shift for us, to actually be the listener rather than the talker.”

UCC and Ireland are leading the way as early adopters of this. A national framework was signed on March 21st. By matching the Irish framework to that of Europe, it will enable Irish students to build their qualifications across the continent. By signing up for the Europass scheme, these qualifications will be instantly recognised around Europe without the need to go searching for transcripts. By building a common structure across Irish universities from the ground up, it will ensure the longevity of microcredentials.

“It’s an exciting way to look at education,” says Mags. “The education system has been very much based on a traditional trajectory. You go through school, you achieve certain awards, and then you go on to university, and then you go on to your postgrad. Whereas this is a different take on it. It allows people to explore their career and develop their academic portfolio too and perhaps do things in a way that wouldn’t be possible for them if they were following a traditional academic route.

“We’ve got a lot of people that are returning to education and through the pandemic, they realised that their job wasn’t as secure as they thought. They’re looking to build a better foundation for themselves of skills that will give them those different avenues. We’re really giving the whole thing a bit of a shake and adding different options.

“We’ve got a lot of people with families that are doing microcredentials because they can fit it in around what they do. We have people that haven’t got that traditional academic career behind them so they’re looking to develop themselves and join an education that they didn’t get first time around. It’s having those options now and we are seeing that people are liking getting back into education and seeing what it can do for them; not only giving them those academic skills but the confidence that they can develop themselves.



Mags Arnold, UCC project lead on the Irish Universities Association’s MicroCreds project, says universities are going through a mindset change:

“We’re getting rid of some of the barriers not only from education but in career progression.”

“There are communities that can be offered microcredentials who traditionally wouldn’t have looked at education as something that was possible for them. Even financially, the thought of having to pay three grand up front for something or €400... That can be a barrier and we forget that.”

Career progression

It’s not just taking modules from courses and repurposing them as microcredentials. The delivery methods are being reimagined with increased flexibility at their core. With the advances in online learning made during COVID, workers can digest bite-sized chunks of learning on their lunch break or parents can do so after putting the kids to bed. All students can go at their own pace and choose their own pathways. Businesses can invest in their employees’ education without losing them for extended periods of study. In that way, it can aid both career advancement and staff retention.

“There are a lot of people within the Irish system that join their job after school and they were reaching a ceiling in their career because the HR structure in their place of work had developed faster than their career. So to get to the next level you needed an undergraduate degree,” says Mags.

“The microcredentials we’re offering are giving them that university-level qualification that their job will recognise and allow them to join that next step on the ladder. So we’re getting rid of some of the

barriers not only from education but in career progression.

“It gives people not only an award but opportunities. The business and the learner know that award has got that university stamp on it, which does hold weight and is recognised nationally and internationally.”

UCC ACE has also moved away from formal exams in assessing these microcredentials. Instead, the assessments are directly applied to the learners’ own context in business or the community. The assessment, therefore, becomes another learning experience for the student to relate to their own lives.

“It’s not just ‘CPD with a new dress on,’” as Mags was once told, “there’s a lot more behind it than that. We’re putting a lot more substance behind it.”

Lyndsey is taking a mini-sabbatical for the next six months to write her doctorate on ‘Conceptions of Lifelong Learning in Higher Education in Ireland’. She’s in the process of “downloading her brain” to ensure all the information she has that’s not written down anywhere else is passed on. The role of microcredentials will no doubt feature prominently in both those handovers and her thesis.

Open to everybody

“I think we are moving very rapidly towards a much more flexible model of higher education and ACE has always been at the core of that. That’s been part of our mission for the last 75 years so we’re

not new to this. We will always be there at the very forefront in trying to push barriers out of people’s way and knock walls down for people because the University should be open to everybody.”

Lyndsey mentions the uncertainty at the initial launch of online courses at the outset of COVID.

“We didn’t know whether our numbers were going to fall off a cliff or what was going to happen but we ended up having our most successful recruitment period ever and our highest number of students. When we dug further into the data, we were reaching students in parts of Ireland we never had students before. We had students off the coast of Mayo. We had students from Donegal. There were students coming from areas that didn’t have access to higher education in their locality and by being online we were able to reach them.”

The classroom and campus will never disappear but ACE won’t leave behind those remote learners in rural communities either. A balance is being struck between the live classroom and virtual learning.

Neither will ACE leave behind anyone else who is denied access to education. These microcredentials will serve to widen access to more learners than ever before.

“Going forward, there should be microcredentials for every setting,” says Lyndsey. “We will be using this to reach out to more marginalised communities. That’s very close to our hearts in ACE, to serve

the learners who have been under-represented for so long through the higher education system, whether that be migrants or members of the Traveller community or people in direct provision. It’s so important for us never to exclude any learner. For us, it’s really important that anybody who wants to learn has the opportunity to do that.

“Adult learners especially can be quite nervous about returning to education if they’ve been out of it for a while and using a microcredential is not such a big commitment. It’s a way for people to test the waters a little bit. The microcredentials aren’t just at the higher master’s level. In UCC, we have them at every level. There’s a microcredential there for someone who has their Leaving Cert and doesn’t have any other qualifications or there’s a microcredential there for someone who has a master’s but still wants to upskill in something niche. We’re trying to make them as accessible to everybody.

“For me, it’s really important that the learners in higher education are representative of society at large. We’ve made great strides in that in Ireland over the last 30 years. I don’t think we’re there yet. There are still a lot of people who are excluded from higher education for a variety of reasons because of different barriers in their way. I think higher education is fundamentally a public good and it should be available to everybody and anybody in our society. That, for me, is critical to the work that we do at ACE.”



Thinking like a mountain: *What the Gearagh teaches us about ourselves*

The Gearagh has recently been labelled “one of Ireland’s least appreciated natural treasures” – such a secret, in fact, that it was written about in the past tense until a Young Scientist project alerted ecologists to its survival 39 years ago.

Located on the River Lee outside Macroom, the last ancient primeval river forest in western Europe, having survived intact since the ice age, was drowned in the mid-1950s. Its river deltas were flooded and its ancient oak trees felled to facilitate the construction of two hydroelectric dams at Carrigadrohid and Inniscarra.

It was thought to have been totally destroyed until local schoolboy Tim Hickey’s 1983 Young Scientist project, which came first in Ireland and third in the world, directed attention to the existence of hectares of unique ancient woodland, complete with rare plant species and diverse wildlife.

The Gearagh was declared a statutory nature reserve in 1987 after campaigning by the Macroom District Environmental Group, led by, among others, Hickey’s biology teacher Kevin Corcoran. It continues to be owned by the ESB.

Decades later, the Gearagh still provokes research. Diarmuid Crowley, Galway-born and Fermoy-raised, returned to UCC to study a Higher Diploma in Geography in 2015 and produced a research master’s on ‘Conservation conflict in the Gearagh’ in 2018. That work proved the inspiration and basis for a UCC short course: Thinking Like a Mountain: An Introduction to Deep Ecology.

“I began looking at the Gearagh and it wasn’t as a case study in conservation conflict, more than anything else because we don’t really have a conflict between humans and nature,” says Diarmuid. “It’s more often the case that it’s conflict between humans about nature.”

“Humans have very different ideas and values and conceptions of that relationship between people and place, between people and their natural environments.”

In 2014, a case was brought to the European Commission against the Irish Government for neglect of the Gearagh and failure to draw up a management plan. Diarmuid began looking underneath the surface

at how different perspectives on the role of nature were influencing what people thought of the situation. The local farmer, who feels a deep connection to the land, talking about the impact of any potential limits to their production on the local economy of co-operatives and agriculture suppliers. The National Parks and Wildlife Service personnel who don’t have the resources to put boots on the ground. The locals speaking for the creatures and habitats of the Gearagh as stakeholders. The ESB didn’t reply to interview requests as part of that project but through reading their reports, their view of nature is as a natural resource for providing electricity.

“On the opposite end of the scale then,” says Diarmuid, “you could have one of the environmental activists that would say something like, ‘When I live by the Lee, the Lee flows through me and it flows by me, and if I damage the Lee, I damage myself.’”

That interconnection between people and place, and the idea of reframing the human relationship with nature, led Diarmuid to propose the six-week Deep Ecology course, which this spring completed its second run.

“It’s very much about finding new ways of thinking and feeling about the relationship between our species and the other life forms that we’ve co-evolved with. A lot of the thinking behind it would be based on ideas about the joy and miraculousness of being alive.”

Intoxicating

He paraphrases Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who coined the term ‘deep ecology’: “It’s about expanding our sense of self beyond our normal smaller social or psychological limits that we place on each other so that when we come around to thinking about the environment, we’re coming at it with a sense of identity with the life around us and with our life support systems. Identity and compassion rather than a sense of moral obligation.

“It’s more about nature and the life around us and our life support system having an intrinsic value in itself rather than just an instrumental value, measured only in terms of its own use to us.”

That chimed with Diarmuid’s Gearagh journey.

“These ideas of a deeper connection to nature began resonating with me and this was new to me so when I’m talking about this on the course to participants or sharing



The Gearagh, located on the River Lee outside Macroom, is the last remaining ancient primeval river forest in western Europe. “I like to share the vividness of that,” says Diarmuid Crowley (inset). “You’d think you were in Florida. You’d think you were back 10,000 years.”

some of my experiences there, it’s very much from a sense of wonder really at how vivid and alive and almost intoxicating this connection was.

“I’m not an established academic so I like to share the vividness of that. You’d think you were in Florida. You’d think you were back 10,000 years. I thought it was the place itself that I was after when I went there first but really, by the end of it, it was the place itself plus the people that really inspired me. It was the two intertwined.”

Diarmuid quotes liberally in conversation.

Indian environmental activist Vandana Shiva is mentioned: “The way you design the world in your mind is the way you relate to it in the real world. When you design it as dead matter to be exploited, you’ll exploit it. When you design it with a deep recognition of interconnectedness, you’ll nurture these relationships.”

American scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer too: “It’s not that the land isn’t broken but that our relationship to it is. We can’t meaningfully proceed with healing, with restoration, without a re-story-ation. We have to implant in ourselves a new kind of story of that relationship. One of partaking in it rather than

conquering it.”

The course draws parallels between colonial legacy and modern-day neoliberalism, with vast accumulations of wealth only getting more and more concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. In that way, deep ecology concepts are firmly rooted in social justice issues.

“I hear great feedback all the time from participants,” says Diarmuid. “That it’s really done in quite a down-to-earth way, which resonates with people. An awful lot of it is about giving a space to people to trust themselves, to trust their connection with life, and what they feel about the world. We have a very highly developed scientific and technological way of understanding the world, as if that was the only way.

“It’s given them a bit of space to articulate something about their love for the world that they wouldn’t always get a chance to so it is very down to earth. I use a lot of photographs and storytelling as well to give the ideas a more concrete form because people learn in so many different ways.

“It’s not all singing and dancing. We have to look at the world and our impact on it in the hard, cold light of day and see how it makes us feel in our guts.”

Diarmuid, who spent more than 10 years working as a sea kayaking guide in Dingle, describes his relationship with his class as like the waves. It’s a two-way flow of conversation, driven by their energy. And, spoken like a true outdoor guide, Diarmuid adds: “I was just surfing along really.”

He describes his work now as a privilege, both enriching and exhilarating to be discussing such subjects among curious minds and seeing the rapport between classmates grow. This year’s cohort featured a handful of artists (Diarmuid, himself, studied art in a previous life) among the mix of educators, sustainability consultants, and those with a general interest. Last year’s group included a retired doctor who had planted his own forest.

“Unfortunately, the word environment has become almost like a word that people don’t want to think about. How we need to start looking at it is that environment really starts with the people around you. It shouldn’t be an abstract thing. How we treat each other is very much tied up with how we treat the environment. So to see those kinds of relationships forming between the course participants is just gold dust.”

‘I was happily surprised Cork had the audacity to shoulder such a global event’



Arne Carlsen (right), former director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, on his first visit to Cork for the 2017 International Conference on Learning Cities. He's pictured alongside Tina Neylon, Cork Lifelong Learning Festival co-ordinator.
Picture: David Keane

When Arne Carlsen began teaching in adult education, he held one curious distinction among adult education teachers – and indeed students. You see Arne took his first classes in Danish state prison when he was not yet an adult.

The man who went on to spearhead UNESCO's work on lifelong learning was just 16 when he became a tutor in prison; giving weekly music classes to the jail's church choir and organising music events.

While studying Philosophy and French in university, he was giving science classes to unemployed adults in local evening schools, taught political refugees, and later did French lessons for the general public.

That was just the start.

His impressive biography contains no room for such details having been bumped out by the panoply of prestigious positions he has fulfilled in the decades since: director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning; founding chair of the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning, which is being

hosted by UCC ACE for the 2020-2025 period; founder of the Nordic-Baltic Summer Academies; executive director of the International Alliance of Leading Education Institutes; and member of the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. In fact, this entire article could be filled entirely with his roll call of positions, professorships, awards, and honours garnered around the globe.

In his own words: “Life has smiled to me.”

He has transitioned from teenage practitioner to researcher to global education policy-maker during his career, which brings him to Cork this September, but not for the first time.

His introduction to the city was in 2017, as UNESCO lifelong learning director, when he was intrigued to see what had Cork following in the footsteps of Beijing and Mexico City as host of the International Conference on Learning Cities.

“I wanted to go myself as I was happily surprised that Cork, as a smaller city, offered to host such a world-level event. Beijing, Mexico City, and then comes Cork,” says

Arne from his office in Copenhagen.

“I was happily surprised that Cork had the audacity and the will and the dynamism and energy to shoulder such an event. I really liked it. That showed me something about the city's wish to take on big responsibility for its citizens.

“To have the outlook to combine with its local activities, that really was promising for the aspirations of its adult education activities and Learning City activities. It was an amazing experience.”

He returned with Denis Barrett, Cork Learning City co-ordinator, in 2019 for a tour of lifelong learning festivals, taking in events in Dublin, Limerick, and Cork. He also wrote a consultancy report for Cork City Council on the path forward for Cork as a Learning City. “I have been more than a bit involved with Cork,” he says ahead of his third visit, to attend the ASEM Global Lifelong Learning Week at UCC next September, where he will deliver the annual Alfred O’Rahilly Lecture.

Arne has changed how he works in the past year. Now, rather than

criss-crossing continents from university to university for month-long stays as a visiting professor, the global audience will come to hear him at UCC as part of the week-long event. They will include organisers and board members of the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame, with the 2022 induction ceremony also being held in UCC.

UCC's hosting of the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub, chaired by ACE director Séamus Ó Tuama, will add to the international reach, with the first in-person Council of Research Network Coordinators meeting taking place since COVID.

“That [the International Conference on Learning Cities] was followed up by Séamus taking the chairmanship and secretariat of the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub can really give a lot of visibility to Cork from other universities in Europe and Asia, not only from higher education institutions but also from adult education institutions who are interested in the research work and, of course, at the policy level of governments in Europe and Asia.”

A human entitlement

Arne's keynote lecture will touch on the newfound international consensus and increased focus on lifelong learning.

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, published in 2015, elevates lifelong learning into a headline target in the sustainable development goals agreed for countries around the world: “Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

The goals either side, to end poverty and hunger, and to achieve gender equality, underline the weight placed on lifelong learning.

UCC's hosting of the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub, chaired by ACE director Séamus Ó Tuama, will add to the international reach

“For the first time in history, lifelong learning was lifted up on par with quality education,” says Arne. “I thought, ‘How nice but let's see what will happen in real life’. And what has happened is amazing.

Now, it's everywhere.”

The European Commission's 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights: “Pillar 1: Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning.”

The International Labour Organization (ILO)'s 2019 Global Commission on the Future of Work: “Goal 1: A universal entitlement to lifelong learning that enables people to acquire skills, upskill, and reskill throughout their life course.”

The European Commission's new agenda for adult learning 2021-2030, approved last November, has five priorities, which mirror much of UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education with its emphasis on making education more accessible, flexible, and inclusive. The European Union's ambitious target for lifelong learning is to have at least 60% of adults (aged 25-64) participating in learning during the previous 12 months by 2030.

“Maybe in the long term, life-long learning or adult learning and education will simply be as self-evident as formal schooling of children.”

“The OECD, the ILO, UNESCO, and the European Commission, the last two, three years, they've gone crazy with all the publications on lifelong learning now. Somehow, they have got the message from UNESCO of the importance of human-centred continued learning throughout life. The importance for the labour market, for civil society, how to be happy in life, how to live in the 21st century.

“Both the social and the economic dimensions are in the focus of these organisations and they see lifelong learning as the way towards these ends.

“Even expressed to the point where the ILO say that in 1948, we got education as a human right. Now they say lifelong learning should be recognised as a human right. So it has taken this human right to a new level, a human entitlement. This is simply amazing.”

Of course, national governments need to take these recommendations and implement the corresponding policies to enact change. The Nordic countries, where Arne started his adult education journey, plus Switzerland, lead the way in participation rates of adults in education but the European average has slipped back during COVID, from 10.8% of adults participating in education during the previous four weeks in 2019 to 9.2% in 2020. Ireland has risen from well below average, 6.5% in 2016 up to 12.6% in 2019, before stumbling back to 11% in 2020.

He points to the CITO (Check-In, Take-Off) Project partnership between Waterford IT, Irish Education and Training Boards, the National Adult Literacy Agency, and agencies in Malta and Norway as having the potential to boost adult participation in education. They have developed an online self-test of literacy, numeracy, and digital skills which identifies a person's strengths, areas to improve, and potential courses to fit their requirements.

The next step, Arne says, may be to use the prevailing international consensus to push for a legally binding convention for countries to implement a universal entitlement to adult education and lifelong learning. A new human right: lifelong learning for all.

"Maybe in the long term, lifelong learning or adult learning and education will simply be as self-evident as formal schooling of children," says Arne.

In the shorter term, Arne is working on two books on adult education and lifelong learning, including one on his own journey. "It's not so much to make a self-biography, which many people like to do when they get older," he insists, "but more to make visible many things that are hidden in the history and development of adult education policies, strategies, and happenings, because things are not what they seem to be and things don't happen in a very obvious way.

"Very often there are things behind the scenes that rule the development so I thought my own life can just be a way to present the behind the scenes of adult education for the last many years."

His preparation for the Alfred O'Rahilly Lecture had him reading up on O'Rahilly, the founder of UCC ACE, from the 2021 edition of this paper. That was more than six months in advance of his September speech so one can imagine the research for his books will be encyclopaedic as ever, all the way back to his teenage self.

'You'll never regret trying something you've always wanted to do'

Tracy O'Driscoll wasn't free to attend her graduation from the Diploma in Youth and Community Work but she will be back. She'll return to the UCC Quad, degree in hand, with her three children in tow looking on at their role model. She doesn't know what course her degree will be in yet and she doesn't know how long it'll take to get there but she knows she will have her graduation day.

From growing up, in her words, without college in her vocabulary, she now has her mind set on returning as a UCC graduate and showing her children (aged 12, 7, and 5) what is possible in education.

"That's exactly the reason why I want to go back and get a degree," Tracy says. "I want them to see me graduate with a degree and I know that it is a domino effect. It's a generational thing. I know for a fact if they see their mother working towards something and getting a degree at the end of it and then working in that field, that they know they can do it."

She is now applying for the Social Work degree, hoping to get accepted to start in September. The Youth and Community Diploma was crucial in and of itself for grabbing her interest, expanding her knowledge, and helping her prove to herself that she could do it.

"I decided to go back and do the Youth and Community just to see if I was capable. I always wanted to get a degree in something. I didn't know what it was but I wanted my children to see that a degree is possible at whatever age.

"I feel like I'm unfinished and when I get where I want to be with a degree – I hope I am lucky enough to start this year – but once I do get the degree, and I know I will eventually, it will be pride of place in my sitting room."

Tracy has been working as a hairdresser for 20 years now. It's something she fell into after school and has never left since then. "Growing up back then, college wasn't in our vocabulary. We did our Leaving Cert, which was a great achievement at the time, but we were just told to get work because to go to college back then, it would have needed a lot of money."

There was always that urge to

fully explore where education could take her, though. She was always upskilling in her work and looked into studying nursing when her eldest child was still a nipper.

Eventually, in 2017, she took the plunge and signed up for that UCC Diploma. When it came to making that course choice, it was her community that had the biggest impact.

Tracy has been living in a Cork City neighbourhood rated as disadvantaged on the Government's Deprivation Index for the past two decades. She's uncomfortable with the stigma that can be attached to that. It's not how she feels about her homeplace. Instead, she sees the potential all around her.

"I would see a lot of disadvantage and a lot of anti-social behaviour but the same young fellas, if you walked in there this minute, I know for a fact that if I pulled up next to them with a trunk full of shopping, they'd help me in with them.

"I just saw potential in young children and teenagers and I just think that there wasn't enough [supports] out there."

She is full of praise for the support she found on arrival at UCC and it didn't take long for the course to fascinate her.

"The very first class we had was with a lecturer, Mark Jordan, and he just gripped the whole class with his stories and the subjects that he was bringing up. It seemed to hit a lot of us in the class and it really caught us and made us interested. The fact that it was a two-year course, part-time as well, it helped me because I could see how it was doable

She is full of praise for the support she found on arrival at UCC and it didn't take long for the course to fascinate her.

"It was very interactive and they listened to you. It was brilliant. Honest to God, it was very good.

"My mother passed away in the summer of 2018 and when I went back to college, I wasn't in the right

Tracy O'Driscoll, who studied the Diploma in Youth and Community Work, wants to show her three children that a degree is possible at any stage of life.



headspace, to be perfectly honest with you, but they were very understanding. They're very accommodating of somebody's life. That's what you need when you're a student, you need somebody that will accommodate you and help you if they can."

Tracy was struck by the positive outlook in the class, which brought together people with backgrounds in community and healthcare work and included some personal stories from those who had overcome addiction. She was intrigued by the theories and practical insights into people's ways of thinking. She was impressed by how the assignments prepared her for further study. And she found the thought of those assignments more daunting than the reality of doing them.

"When I got the first assignment, I nearly died. I was like, 'How am I going to do this?' I think the first one was a group thing so we all helped each other out in that. It's pressure but it's doable and then when you see yourself actually succeeding, then you see you can do it.

"It opened my eyes to show that it is doable if you really want to do it."

She did a placement with ABLES adult literacy centre, helping people improve their literacy and numeracy in one-to-one classes. She trained to be an adult literacy tutor and kept going with that work on a voluntary basis one night a week until COVID put an end to that.

"They work with the community so that was a big thing for me, teaching people that education is the key but you don't necessarily have to learn through mainstream schools to understand. You learn through multiple intelligences and that's another thing that I learned [on the Diploma] with the practice and theory behind people's thinking."

Tracy hopes to return to community work down the line. She knows the effect it can have and the difference those role models can make. She remembers the impact Ann Long, another course lecturer, had on her.

"I loved her classes. She's another lady who was very inspirational to me, coming from the same area that I'm coming from and being a lecturer in UCC.

"When you look at your neighbour and go, 'Oh my God, they're in college, they're doing this'... that was a big thing for me to see how successful she was after going back to school. She had a lot of kids and still went back to college and worked her way up and she was pivotal in me going back as well. I remember calling to her and she was like, 'Just do it, Tracy. Just do it.'

I always wanted to get a degree in something. I didn't know what it was but I wanted my children to see that a degree is possible at whatever age.

"People can be very inspirational... You can be inspirational to a stranger and you mightn't even know it. She was to me anyway.

"It is a domino effect. If people see your neighbour going to college, it's something that you go, 'I could do it.' You don't know what impact it's going to have but I know in my household it'll be positive anyway."

And what would Tracy say to anyone calling to her thinking of taking up a course?

"I'd just say, do it. If you're thinking about it now, you're going to be thinking about it in 10 years' time. It's better to regret the things you've done than to regret the things you haven't done.

"You're never going to regret trying your best at something that you've always wanted to do."

Leading role: Behind the breakthroughs in fight against Covid

When Tracy Walshe, supply chain lead for Pfizer's Grange Castle site, looks back on the COVID pandemic in years to come, she'll ask herself one question: "How the heck did we manage to do that?"

How did they manage to switch in an instant from an office base to remote working? How did they maintain the production of life-changing medicines while keeping staff safe? How did they work without fail through the disruptions of employees having to isolate? And how did they develop at lightspeed a COVID vaccine from testing and clinical trials to manufacturing and distribution in less than a year?

At its core, her theory is simple: "Typically the answer is because we had very, very good people around us and we supported each other."

UCC ACE and Pfizer have been partners on a Higher Diploma in Leadership Development since before COVID. It was that type of investment in leaders that created the capacity for change amid a global crisis.

"We want to invest in leaders because we believe they are the future and they make all the difference," says Tracy. "You can have all the good science and you can have all the good technology and all the good digital parts but the heart of any organisation is its people."

She quotes Pfizer's mission statement, "to deliver breakthroughs that change patients' lives", and also a leadership principle from Grange Castle: "servant leadership". The idea is that leaders are there to support their staff members in order to build effective teams and foster the innovative, problem-solving mindset that can bring about the organisational change to make those breakthroughs.

Record time

"It's a big role for leaders to make sure you're getting the best out of your people through coaching. It's very much a changed dynamic in the modern workplace where a lot of people coming in have a third-level education and some have postgrads, PhDs. So you're not the smartest person in the room as a leader but you have something that can get the best out of that person and that's an element of what we're trying to do in the programme; things like change management, being able to lead transformational change, like bringing in a vaccine in record time."

Tracy is a UCC graduate, with a Biomedical Science degree and a Virology Master's, who has over 20 years' experience with Pfizer

(and previously Wyeth, who Pfizer acquired in 2009). The Glen of Aherlow-native was director of vaccines drug substance at their Dublin campus at the onset of the pandemic before switching to site supply chain lead in July 2020. It's been a role she describes as "interesting, fantastic, a privilege, and a whirlwind couple of years".

"Overnight, we were all supposed to be working from home and a huge onus came on people leaders to make sure that they were taking care of their teams but also that they were trying to keep the business going as well. It was a really challenging time for leaders but one of the benefits of the leadership course was that we saw the best of our leaders during that time of crisis.

"We saw things like the three Cs of leadership in crisis: confidence, compassion, and communication. All of those types of things would be elements of the leadership course in UCC."

Tracy draws a distinction between managers and leaders. Both have different roles. One doesn't have to be a manager to lead a team.

"We like to target it at some of our aspiring leaders because one of the things is we have the best talent from the point of view of scientists, engineers, production staff, supply chain staff, but there is a transition when people go from an individual contributor role to a leadership role. That was one of the reasons why we wanted to provide that support with the course.

"We're very aware that in order to deliver breakthroughs that change patients' lives we need the best talent and we need the best leaders and that's why we invest in our leaders from that point of view. We wanted to make sure that we had the type of leaders that can effectively lead organisational change, build teams, navigate challenging business conversations, but key to it as well was to build talent and to essentially inspire people that what we do is important and that the why of what we do is worth going that extra mile for.

Inspirational leaders

"To be inspirational leaders is the ultimate goal because people who are inspired will always bring their best to teams. Today, people want to do something that's important and we believe very strongly that what we do is important. We aspire to have that type of dynamic and it has never been so clear in how the site and Pfizer responded to the COVID crisis both from a running-the-site point of view but also on top of that to build a new manufac-

turing suite and produce the Comirnaty vaccine."

Stephanie Ennis, colleague support in Pfizer's HR department at Grange Castle, is involved in supporting the UCC Leadership Development course as well as taking the course herself, a decision she made during lockdown.

a great opportunity to get a higher diploma with UCC and it's all done on-site so it was a no-brainer for me."

It's not just the three Cs of leadership in crisis, the course has given Stephanie three more Cs: confidence (that word again), connections, and critical thinking.

again and confidence in learning more so that you can bring more to meetings.

"Being able to go back and learn and get the qualification was really important to me and it's delivered in a way that you understand. The breakout rooms really helped and you get to know people from oth-



Pfizer's Grange Castle plant in West Dublin is one of three sites where UCC ACE's Higher Diploma in Leadership Development is held, alongside Newbridge and Ringaskiddy. There are currently five HDip courses being delivered across the three locations.

"I reckon if I was going to get anything in COVID, I might as well get this," she quips. "I've got two kids but they're a little bit older and I like to keep learning. For me, it was

"By doing the course, it challenges you, that critical thinking, and it just stretches my mind. That's what I needed. I needed to get confidence that I can go back out and study

er areas within the business which is quite nice and it gives you their perspective. It deepens the relationship because you're all going through it together.

'It gives them a sense of belonging, that their life is being valued and acknowledged'

John Ryan, a further education teacher at the Q Centre, Mallow, came late to UCC but says his studies were a "revelation".

When John Ryan walked into the Q Centre in Mallow a decade ago, he took the first steps of a long education journey that would carry him a short distance – from his place among his classmates to the top of the classroom. Back to where it all started. From student to teacher.

Since then, he has been dedicated to giving his students the educational opportunities he belatedly received. Last autumn, he finished his second UCC qualification in a subject he would've benefited greatly from on his own initial return to education – Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

The Continuing Professional Development (CPD) course in RPL – the only one of its kind in Ire-

land – is specifically designed to support educators in dealing with employees with low educational qualifications (on paper), lone parents, Travellers, migrants, people with disabilities, and marginalised and vulnerable adults.

John jokes that I mustn't tell UCC how poor his Leaving Cert was: "They might look at my background and say he shouldn't have been there at all."

Because his father died when John was young, he left education early to work in retail. The knowledge and life experiences he gained over the years would now get greater recognition through RPL initiatives.

"I'm very interested in inclusion

because I'm from a background where many people of my situation wouldn't have ever gone to college or wouldn't have ever had the opportunity to go to a prestigious place like UCC, or indeed any third-level institution," says John, a Banteer native who has lived in Mallow for the last 20 years.

After taking those first steps through the Q Centre, John enrolled in Arts, taking on English and Sociology as his major subjects.

"That was the daunting thing: would I be able to do the academic work? I'd only barely done word processing.

"One thing that conversely gave me a lot of hope was... I can't remember the subject we had the first day

“It’s helped my confidence. It reminds me of the stuff I do know but forgot that I know and it has helped my critical analysis of things too. It’s being able to take everything into account. You do an awful lot more reasoning so you’re more up to date on what’s relevant in the market. It really opens your mind up to start asking questions and thinking about things a little bit differently, which I think has been really beneficial.”

The course is run every second Tuesday, from lunchtime into the evening, with half the content done on company time and the other half in the employee’s own time. “The benefits of it being online [since COVID] is that you can actually go home, log on, and you’re there for the evening,” says Stephanie.

“I’m not going to lie, the assignments are heavy going but for me, rather than getting overwhelmed by it, I used to just break it down and go, ‘If I could do 300 words a night on an assignment and give myself the time, it’s not going to be so big’. Everybody has their own way so it’s just trying to find a way that works for you with everything else that goes on in life.

“The first one is the hardest and you build a level of confidence each and every time because you know what you need to do. The rubrics that they have in it are really helpful and the lecturers are so helpful. They are literally telling you what it is that they want and if you can follow that, that is going to be beneficial.”

For Stephanie, who has a HR qual-

ification and a diploma in coaching and mediation, the course has raised the possibility of further study.

“I wouldn’t rule it out. It’s just opened the door; it’s expanded the mind. Anything is possible if you put your mind to it and if you have an interest. I just can’t wait to get my assignment done and out of the way and go ‘yay!’ and then decide what next.

“I have absolutely no regrets doing it. It’s been really beneficial. The fact that the company make it easier for you to be able to provide the time, we’re really lucky that we’re supported the whole way through. My manager has been great and I know a lot of the managers who support our SLT [senior leadership team], they are actually coaches to people doing the course itself, which shows their investment in it too.”

Word of mouth

The course, which attracts a full cohort of over 20 with each intake, will continue to thrive based on reviews from its students, says Tracy.

“You can imagine that it’s through word of mouth that people will sign up for it so it’s got a very good reputation on-site and there’s typically a waiting list for people to go on it. You can imagine if word got out that it was useless or people hadn’t progressed in their career or got a lot out of it, we wouldn’t have the numbers of people going for it that are so it’s very well regarded and I’ve seen a lot of leaders growing hugely in it.”

That final change management module, which Stephanie is studying as she speaks, is particularly applicable. “It’s very relevant to

what’s going on in the world and Pfizer is an organisation, with the COVID vaccine, where everything has quickened. We have to be resilient to working in that changing environment. Working with change, the project management, it’s really good practical skills, a good way of thinking of things.”

The speed of change is a point Tracy agrees on. The role of the course is not just important for the present methods of working but as a form of future-proofing too.

“The modules are very much tailored to what’s important to the leaders, what we value in leaders. We need leaders that are okay with change and can drive change, that can build effective teams, make decisions quickly, be innovative, and that’s very aligned to some of the

types of projects that we do and the future of Pfizer. A lot of it is in innovative medicines which means that we’re going to do things a lot quicker in future.

“If you look at the COVID vaccines, the Grange Castle team, when we were asked to so the vaccine, it was a project called a light-speed project so basically you have to be agile as a leader to get your teams to do different things and be okay with that.

“The site did a fantastic job of getting a new production area up and running and the COVID vaccine, the drug substance element of it, made in the site. A lot of that is due to the quality of the leaders that we have due to the course.”



Stephanie Ennis, colleague support in Pfizer’s HR department at Grange Castle, is involved in supporting the UCC Leadership Development course as well as taking the course herself.



Tracy Walshe, supply chain lead for Pfizer’s Grange Castle site, says “you’re not the smartest person in the room as a leader but you have something that can get the best out of that person”.

but the lecturer said – and I think he was more directing it at secondary school students – ‘You can forget everything now that you’ve done as regards learning off’. He said, ‘We want you to think independently. We want you to be critical thinkers. We will give you the lectures, we will give you the ideas and sources and references, and we’ll give you all the resources, but we want your thinking, we want your thoughts, we want your perspectives backed up by the literature.’

“That gave me hope in the sense that now I knew I didn’t actually have to learn anything off – and I didn’t. In UCC itself, I must have done only four exams because the rest of them were assignment-based and if we did exams, they were open book.

Forever grateful

“We were very well prepared in all our subjects and the amount of resources and support we got was unbelievable. I learned how to be a student in UCC in first year cer-

tainly. I will be forever grateful to UCC for giving me the support to become a student and now being a teacher as well, I still draw on UCC’s ideas, the learning I gained there, the way the lecturers taught us, the way the tutors taught our tutorials, and all the support we got. It was just unbelievable.”

He gave back plenty of support in return. He volunteered with the Disability Support Service, worked as an intern in the Chaplaincy, and by the end of his three years, the man who hadn’t the Leaving Cert points to get into university now had a first-class honours degree from UCC.

He was wondering where next when Marion Hennessy and Brendan Glynn of the Q Centre suggested further education teaching. It was a chance for John to pass on the opportunities given to him and having graduated from WIT’s Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching in Further Education, he re-joined them, not as a student but a colleague.

He’s passionate about integrating the learners’ life experiences into his lessons, which focus on adult literacy and digital skills.

“Some of them may have had a very bad experience of learning. People were put in the back of the class long ago because they may not have been assessed as having dyslexia or dyscalculia because we didn’t understand. Now, it’s about helping them, supporting them to develop skills and accept one another.

“I want to try to give them a sense that they’re part of a group. They’re part of a learning community. That’s very important for people on the margins of society and people who may have mental health issues or specific requirements for learning.

“But yet these people have learned too and all people have learned something that they can give to their classmates in the room, as well as to me. And I learn from this and I can design my activities and

my work around their living.

“Even that alone, it says, ‘Oh, he’s talking about me’. It’s using daily life examples and it gives them a sense of belonging, and a sense of worthwhile, and a sense of confidence in themselves, and that their life is being valued and acknowledged, and that’s where recognition of prior learning comes in.”

It’s an ethos that applies to UCC too and John refers three times

to his wonderful description of how UCC “scaffolds” students as they build their skillset.

“What UCC also gives is a sense of independence and thinking. It supported me in developing my skills, developing my literature skills, my critical skills, my analysis skills. I wouldn’t be where I am today without UCC, even doing the ACE programme afterwards just cemented it.”

continued on page 8



Completing the jigsaw

He goes out of his way to thank Ciara Staunton and ACE for being “absolutely outstanding” in organising the RPL course, mentioning the range of speakers, of supports, of topics, and the contact time.

“Ciara was always there. She answered our emails. She talked to us before the classes if we had any questions about anything. She organised academic writing classes, reflective writing classes for us. She organised a whole load of things. There is nothing more she could have done. She was outstanding and the amount of support she gave us really was a joy to behold. It was unbelievable.

“It was like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that come together when you’re doing the assignments and the assignments were absolutely spot on. They were absolutely ideal for what they were intended to do and it felt great to be part of UCC again.

“UCC has given me the confidence... and ACE in doing the RPL courses has added to that confidence again in saying: you still have it, John, and you still can

make a little difference.

“Everything I did, especially when I was in UCC, seems to have fitted in as part of a jigsaw, and looking back on it now if I didn’t do all those things, if I didn’t take the opportunities, there would be pieces missing and the jigsaw wouldn’t be complete. I won’t say it’ll ever be fully complete because I want to go back and I want to learn more.”

UCC is applying the recognition of prior learning in various contexts, including a pioneering partnership with a group of West Cork farmers, who were exempted from 40 credits of the Diploma in Environment, Sustainability, and Climate due to their prior learning and practical expertise.

John commends that project, adding: “UCC and the higher levels of education are reaching out into the community and they’re reaching out to people who may never have thought that they could do this but please, please tell them they can do this. They can. They can.”

His own wish is that UCC now expands its links with the further education sector, both in their innovative RPL work and in creating

more pathways between further and higher education.

“UCC has so much to offer us further education teachers. It’s completely untapped in this area and the CPD opened the door to it. And I can tell you this, you’ll definitely have one participant anyway and I’m sure you’ll have many more because I can see the value that we got. Everything we learned was so valuable.

“We can open pathways between the two sectors, which is exactly what the Department of Further and Higher Education is looking for, and help more people to go to college and to succeed because I know my time in UCC, I’ll never forget and I hope to do more courses there. So I’m not saying goodbye at all, by any manner or means, but I hope to do more.

“Whether I don’t or do, or whether it’s a different third-level institution or not, my learning at UCC and lately through ACE, in particular, has been a revelation. It has been challenging but it has ultimately been hugely rewarding.”

John, who was supported in his studies by Nuala Glanton of Cork

ETB, would love to put those lessons into practice. He also can’t wait to return to UCC in the future, where he also took a Brain Health short course.

“I’ve got a love of learning and some might say yeah, that’s just hearsay, but no, it isn’t. There is a love of learning. I mean I’ve got to do loads. I got to look at the sociology of designing housing spaces. I got to learn Old English. I got to learn technology. I got to learn philosophical ideas. That’s brilliant.

“I never thought at 18 that I could do anything near even walking into UCC and buying a cup of coffee. That’s as far away as it was back then but I now feel a sense of pride going to UCC. I really enjoyed my time, I made the most of it, I learned, I took opportunities, and I know ACE will provide opportunities for people, and what I’d say to people is ‘God, if you have any motivation at all, do apply’.

“And there’ll always be support for people and long may that continue.”

Pat Twomey’s UCC biography says he took the “scenic route” to education. That we can confirm. Little did the child who left school before his Junior Cert ever see himself returning to the classroom. And little did the man who lost his job when Ford shut down their Cork factory in 1984 ever think he would go to college, never mind lecture there. And little did that opinion change over the subsequent decade spent in a variety of jobs, culminating in driving a minibus for the Ballincollig Senior Citizens Club.

“I went to the North Monastery in Cork and I suppose the style of teaching didn’t suit me,” Pat begins. “I mean there was corporal punishment that time and I suppose I wasn’t the best of pupils either.

“I came from a working-class northside of Cork family and while my mother and father were mad for me to continue on in my studies, I just wasn’t applying myself and I think they decided that maybe getting an apprenticeship was best. I was just more than happy to leave school at the time.”

So Pat left education at 15 expecting never to return. He got an ap-

Common knowledge: Why adult education is all about the collective

Niamh O’Reilly isn’t about the individual, she’s all about the collective, and let that be her final personal statement for just a while.

Her attitude is a perfect match for that of her employers AONTAS, Ireland’s national adult learning organisation, where Niamh is CEO.

That organisation’s very foundation in 1969 traces some of its roots back to UCC, with then ACE director Seán Ó Murchú instrumental in its creation and acting as its first president.

So when Niamh praises ACE’s focus on the collective and its community education partnerships extending beyond the UCC main gates, it mirrors an AONTAS approach that’s best exhibited in their STAR Awards (showcasing teamwork, awarding recognition).

“The sector is about the collective. Even the awards, it’s about the collective achievement and advocacy is about the collective. It’s not about individuals getting something.

“UCC and ACE particularly are about the collective and it’s not individual. That’s why we don’t have individual awards... It’s recognising innovation and partnership, and I know you’re really good at partnership in Cork, probably the best in Ireland.”

Niamh is speaking after an “inspir-

ing week” hosting the AONTAS Adult Learners’ Festival, which featured those awards. She points to the strong Cork-based showing among the national prizes, name-checking the Cope Foundation’s Ability Board advocacy group for people with intellectual disabilities for their innovative work and wonderful celebrations at the announcement.

Over 250 events were held at local level across the week by AONTAS members. It shows the vibrancy among their Community Education Network, who have ploughed on providing local services through the COVID pandemic. While many institutions were able to switch online during this time, education disadvantage was exacerbated.

There was a significant drop in participation in education among the Traveller and Roma communities (down 25%), people with disabilities, the over-50s, and refugees and asylum seekers (all down 15%) in 2020.

“It’s almost as if everything’s back to normal and it’s all ‘let’s move on’ [after COVID] but there are so many people who couldn’t engage or they couldn’t do qualifications,” says Niamh.

“At the early stages of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) between 2019 and 2021

there’s a drop of 50% in major awards from Level 1 to 3, and 25% at Level 4, so we still don’t know the full picture of it.”

Niamh represented AONTAS at the Department of Education’s COVID-19 Tertiary Education System Steering Group and chaired the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group, work which led to €10m in funding to the sector through the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund.

“If you consider the annual budget for SOLAS [which oversees the further education and training sector] is 10 million annually, it was obviously a hugely positive thing for the sector. And then Minister [Simon] Harris made a statement where he agreed to continue this into the future.

“As part of our policy day, we put together a view of the impact and for some groups, like one group in Kerry said, without the funding we wouldn’t have been able to exist.”

Learning to learn

The pandemic has emphasised the need for education services to be flexible and accessible for adult learners. An increase in online learning opportunities has been popular among people with disabilities and lone parents, for example, so long as the technology and Wi-

Fi needs are met.

“There is great potential and it does show that the rigid system that there was previously around full-time [education] only really suited a certain cohort and particularly not adult learners, with all the things that they have to do in their life.

“It’s taken the learning from the learner perspective, what worked for them, and I think there’s great opportunity.

“We’re very fortunate in Ireland to have really committed, amazing educators who are so passionate about the work and it’s something we shouldn’t take for granted. We do a lot of work at European level and nothing in my experience was close to the passion, whether it’s in Cork or across Ireland, of people who work in the sector.

“We have a way of engaging with learners through community education that was developed in the ‘70s and ‘80s. We know that outreach, going into communities, having spaces that are supportive, where [learners] experienced is valued, whether they’ve got tutors who come from the same background as them, whether they’re working-class people who come through the system and become tutors... if you have the funding, the groups can respond to local needs, but they need accountable autonomy. Community groups need to be able

to respond to local need and to be funded to do it.

“They have the experience and the ability to do it. It’s about outreach, supporting people to come back and maybe do non-accredited [courses] first, the ‘learning to learn’ skills, knowing that that adult education is not like school, that they’re supported. Learners last week were talking of being respected, of being supported to share their experience and have a voice. Many of them said when they went back, they felt very comfortable in community education organisations.

“It’s also recognising what we have in Ireland, which is a really unique way of engaging people through community education, and that’s also supported through ACE who are so supportive of adult community education.”

That long-standing AONTAS-ACE connection has been strengthened recently by partnering on the Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), targeted at community education practitioners.

“Where it really counts and where it makes such a difference is for people at the early stages of the NFQ, that recognition of their prior experience and to be able to get a qualification,” says Niamh.

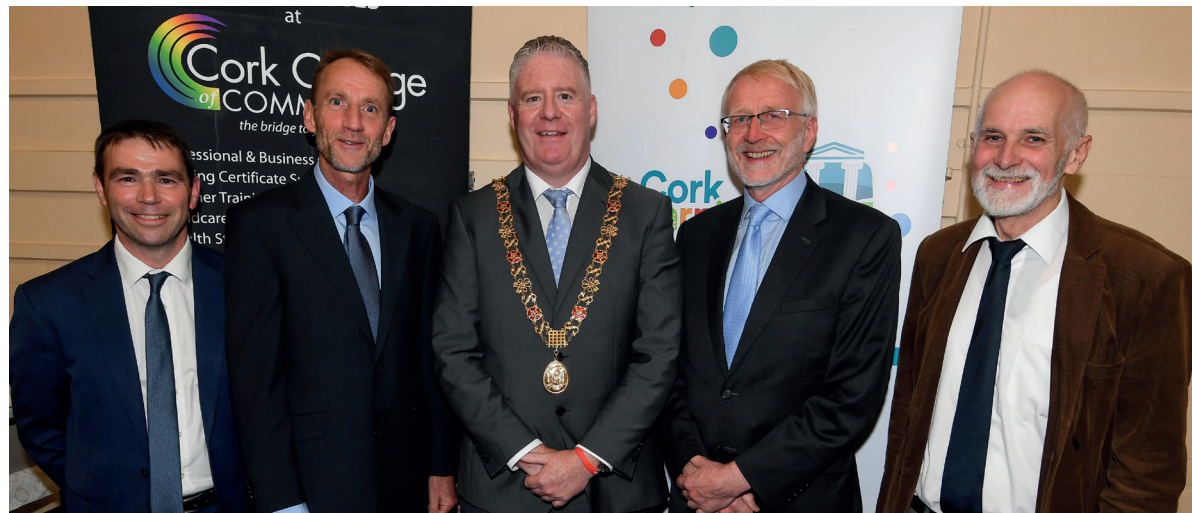
prenticeship to be a panel beater, served his time, and got a good job with Ford. Then the recession came and Ford left. Pat was married with four kids. He picked up pieces of work here and there doing whatever was needed to get by. But it wasn't his work situation that inspired him to look toward education.

"My daughter began her Leaving Cert so I used be helping her in the evening. I really got interested again in history and English and mathematics and things like that because I was good at maths and English when I was in school originally but I just didn't apply my-

self."

Ireland still had a low rate of educational attainment by European standards at the end of the 1980s; not among children but among adults who had left school early in the previous decades. They were bringing down the figures, a link had been drawn to the unemployment rate, and the Irish Government wanted to catch up. Their response, in 1989, was the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme. It was this campaign that brought Pat back into education three years later.

"I was in between jobs at this stage



"What was unique about the partnership was that ACE helped educators get a qualification around RPL, and the whole point of it was to build the capacity of the sector to target people at early stages where I think it makes the most impact."

Emergency mode

The current AONTAS strategic plan runs to the end of this year and having been impacted by the COVID since it was written, the next strategy document will naturally reflect that crisis situation. Based on ongoing consultation with members, it'll likely include an emphasis on ensuring digital learning is equitable for marginalised groups, that part-time flexible learning is further integrated into the traditional further and higher education system, and providing resources so community education can continue to adapt and respond to local needs.

"How can the sector continue this level of being able to work in an emergency context when it's underfunded, when people are burnt out, have been in an emergency mode for two years, and the core funding for staff costs and community ed is not covered? Who is going to take up a job where they can't afford to pay the rent in Dublin because of how poorly paid it is and there are no career paths?"

Niamh will continue to give a voice to adult learners. She talks about Pamela from South Hill and how community education gives her a place where she feels she belongs. She mentions Clara, another learner, who spoke about the importance of people realising there are free

courses out there for people who don't have the means or understand the system. She recalls learners speaking about how education gave them an identity and self-belief, and how adult learners' education journeys inspired their children to follow in their footsteps and progress to university.

And to make room for Niamh's own story for a moment, she will be inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame at a ceremony in UCC this September.

"I hate talking about myself," she insists, and she backs it up in her actions. The COVID-delayed ceremony was supposed to take place in October 2021 but six months later, she still hasn't mentioned it to her colleagues or the AONTAS board.

But the woman who traces her roots back through the generations along Dublin's Liffey St, who started her work in adult education by doing literacy tutoring, will become just the second Irish person, after Maria Slowey, to be added to the Hall of Fame in its 30th year.

"Look, of course, it's good for the sector. It's good that Ireland gets the recognition. It's usually people from other countries who get this award. It's usually men if you look at the history.

"I think everybody in adult education in Ireland has learned from each other and it's not an individual... Yes, of course, in the end, one person gets it, but it's from everybody's collective experience.

"I mean I've learned from all the

The scenic route to education: *'I was learning things I never even knew existed'*

The Diploma in Social Studies, which had lain dormant for the previous five years, was revived in September 2018. Pat Twomey (right), who got his first experience of third-level education through that diploma, was asked to be course co-ordinator.

Also pictured at the launch are (from left): Denis Barrett (Cork Learning City co-ordinator), Cathal O'Connell (UCC School of Applied Social Studies), then Lord Mayor Mick Finn, and Séamus Ó Tuama (UCC ACE director).

and I saw in the Labour Exchange that they were offering a Leaving Cert course in Scoil Stiofáin Naofa, as it was called at the time.

"It was a national school but they were trying to transition because it

was located in Ballyphehane and all the young kids were nearly finished growing up. They were losing their children's population so they were trying to reinvent themselves into a post-Leaving Cert and Leaving Cert-for-adults school.

"The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme was giving money to the school to try and get adults to do their Leaving Cert. I saw this campaign that you get the equivalent of the dole and there'd be extra money as well so I put my name down for it and I was accepted on the course."

Everything went well and Pat, like his daughter, got his Leaving Cert. But then, he found, there was nowhere to progress.

"I didn't know too much about the adult education and I thought UCC

was just something that wasn't made for me. I just continued on my journey then. I got on a community employment scheme and as part of that, there was funding available to retrain people into different professions or to go on in education. So I decided to do my bus driving licence and I got that, [so I was] driving a minibus for the Ballincollig senior citizens."

There was also funding for educational courses. Pat signed up for UCC's Diploma in Social and Community Studies at Douglas Community School in 1995, with the community employment scheme covering the fee. "I went out there for two years – it was every Tuesday and every Thursday for two years – and I really loved it. I loved the adult approach to education."

continued on page 16



AONTAS CEO Niamh O'Reilly will become just the second Irish person to be inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame at a ceremony in UCC this September.

members, people who've worked in the sector, the unsung heroes for 20 years who we hope that we can recognise through the STAR Awards, the amazing educators, whether it's in Maynooth University or UCC, because the work is about being part of a community

and a collective, and that's why we in AONTAS can be good at what we do.

"That's the whole point of adult education, to bring the expertise of everybody to the table and to be able to move forward for social

change, so recognising that broadly in Ireland is important."

Her platform, once again, given to represent those who haven't the same opportunity, and to recognise the collective achievement.

Community support: *‘It made me see Cork with new eyes’*

UCC ACE’s Community-Based Mentoring programme may have finished in February but it continues through the connections forged between the participants.

Cathy Kelly tells of her joy in hearing the experiences of people “on the same wavelength”, while Fionnuala O’Connell speaks of seeing Cork with “new eyes” due to the range of community groups and supports that were brought together on the course.

They will meet up again. Of that, they have no doubt. In fact, they hope to expand the circle by involving more community mentors in their newfound network.

“The support that the group offers, it’s still something that’s there and with the people you meet, I feel comfortable just calling someone up and asking them a question. It’s that kind of environment that was created,” says Fionnuala, a youth project worker with the Cork Migrant Centre.

“The best part was hearing from the group because you get to meet people from different communities around Cork who are doing so, so, so much. I was listening to some people’s experiences and I’m like, ‘Wow! If I ever have this issue, I’m going to call you!’”

“There was that relationship established where everyone was so open with their experiences and so open to pass on the knowledge they have received while doing this work. It was so good for contacts and we’ll keep in contact which is nice.”

For Cathy, a retired literacy tutor with the Ballyphehane-Togher Community Development Project, the course, brought to her attention by the Cork Learning Neighbourhoods programme, backed up so much of what she had been practicing over the previous 32 years.

“I loved every minute of it because I was with other like-minded people. I was fascinated hearing their experiences. You hear other people talking about things and you just say, ‘Oh my God!’ You get the feeling that what I was doing was kind of right. It was very reassuring,” she says.

“It was great for me because we were on the same wavelength. We were all coming from the same place really. Our hearts were in it and you got a very good sense of that with the group. We didn’t have to be there but we wanted to be there.

“We did so much learning from each other which was marvellous. It was something that I came away and I was glad I was doing it. When



Cork Migrant Centre youth project worker Fionnuala O’Connell (right) with Naomi Masheti, Cork Migrant Centre programme co-ordinator, after the Ubuntu live show at UCC’s Honan Plaza. The event, in collaboration with the UCC CIPHER hip hop project and The Kabin Studio, was filmed as part of the Change Makers series for RTÉ.

I saw some of the younger people there, I was so impressed by their enthusiasm and their desire to help others on their learning road.”

Universal language

Mentoring is a key part of Fionnuala’s role, working with young people from migrant backgrounds and those living in direct provision. An International Development and Food Policy graduate from UCC, she volunteered for the UCC Africa Society, the UCC Fáilte Refugees Society, and the Cork Migrant Centre before being hired by the latter.

“We do work around creativity as

a means of expression because we work with such dynamic young people from different backgrounds. We thought by using music and creativity, it’s something that everyone can understand. It’s a universal language.

“A lot of the work is around building self-esteem and confidence to enable them to be who they are and to get greater opportunities and be comfortable in their surroundings because I know a lot of them are new to Ireland and feel very isolated.”

They offer classes in music writing, dance, and drama. One project, in

collaboration with the UCC Theatre Department, sees them travel to Millstreet every Friday to do drama in one of Cork’s most isolated direct provision centres.

Another part of her job she describes as “supporting-slash-mentoring” is helping young people transition to third-level education.

“Some young people have been in the direct provision centres for so long they become institutionalised in a way and so when they come to university, they find it really difficult to get orientated. A lot of the time it’s just checking in and having little coffee meetings, signpost-

ing and giving them access to what I know from going to UCC.”

Fionnuala, who moved to Cork for college, knows first-hand how long it can take to realise the full extent of supports that are available in places like UCC. Now at the Cork Migrant Centre, a relatively small organisation, those community partnerships are vital. “There’s no point in reinventing the wheel if there are already these amazing structures set up with resources to support.”

In Ballyphehane and Togher, Cathy has been giving literacy support and tutor training for years but she never fully realised the role of mentoring in that – or at least never put that word on it.

Cathy has served the community all her working life. She describes herself as a latecomer to working full-time, having been out of the workforce for 20 years rearing her six children. She’s speaking the day before visiting her daughter and newborn granddaughter in Australia, as well as her uncle and aunt – which reminds her of why she got into literacy tutoring in the first place.

“My uncle, going back over 30 years ago, was living in Australia. I remember I heard somebody on the radio one day talking about it and I just realised, God, it must be awful if you’re abroad like that and you couldn’t write a letter or you couldn’t read a letter from loved ones and that really stuck in my mind. At that time, telephone calls to Australia were very expensive and you wouldn’t be making them that often.

“That’s really what spurred me on the first day. I said, ‘If I couldn’t read and if I couldn’t communicate by writing with my uncle in Australia... If there are people out there who couldn’t do that, just to try to give them some help to maybe be able to do that.’”

In any tutoring or mentoring role, it’s never a one-way street. The learning is shared. It goes both ways.

“You learn so much,” says Cathy. “I used always say that to my tutors: ‘You think you’re helping somebody to read or write or do basic maths but they come from all walks of life and you’re going to learn so much yourself.’

“Anybody that I ever tutored, I learned so much from that person as well. You could meet a mechanic this week, you might meet somebody who’s interested in golf the next week, and wants to be able to learn how to write up the scorecard for the golf. It’s such a range and

then you work always to a person's strengths because they might say, 'Oh my God, my spellings are terrible', and I'd say, 'Yeah, but you can strip down an engine and make a broken car work, something I can't do'.

"You work to a person's strengths and you encourage them on their strengths because they have been emphasising their weaknesses for a lifetime."

The Continuing Professional Development course in Community-Based Mentoring served a similar purpose, in ways, giving the students more confidence in what they were already doing.

"Getting more structured learning around mentoring was important for me to help my confidence as a community support leader, as a mentor," says Fionnuala. "Part of doing the course was it was very interesting and it was something that I felt could benefit the work I was already doing. Micheál [Ó hAodáin, course coordinator] is amazing because we covered such a wide range of what it means to be a mentor, what it means to be a community worker, understanding the different roles, the different challenges, the barriers."

Excited

"Micheál was marvellous," Cathy adds. "He knew exactly how to lead things and how to give us our head and he gave us all the information. Some of us knew some of it before, some of us didn't, but I knew the value of what he was giving us."

"When he might bring up something all about multiple intelligences or learning styles, I used to nearly be getting excited listening to it: 'Oh my God, this is all so familiar to me!' And that encouraged me to carry on because in my head, it was heading in the right direction."

"It was drawing on our experiences; how we would mentor yet at the same time, how we were able to translate what we learned through the course into practice."

"At least we're not on our own. We know where to go for the information now."

In those classes, when Fionnuala reflected on what mentoring means to her, she didn't just think of her work. She thought of mentors past, present, and future.

"I thought about how I was mentored by people I didn't even know were mentoring me and how I played the mentoring role in the past without using the name as such."

"One of the reasons I actually decided to do the course was because Cork Migrant Centre has been working with young people from migrant backgrounds in direct provision for ages. We have young people that are passing the age of

18 but a lot of them are still in the centres and many of them have progressed to third-level education. You're always conscious that they're also mentors. You're automatically role models and mentors because you have crossed a bridge that someone else has not crossed yet. You're automatically a guide without realising it for someone who's interested in doing that thing."

"So a lot of the young people we

open to people when they approach in a moment of need."

"My heart was in it and I loved it all those years," says Cathy. "The part I loved most was meeting the people and helping them to get on the road."

"You'd see people coming in, adults in their 40s, 50s, 60s, and they're bearing their soul, that they had difficulties with reading and writing. Just to see their self-esteem

went, people were reading things, billboards, and even in the canteen at work, there were fellas reading the newspapers, doing crosswords. They always shied away from things."

"Sometimes when someone comes to you for help," says Fionnuala, "your response determines if they go and seek help elsewhere, or if they never go to seek help anywhere. I know that sounds a bit too

on; the idea that once whatever you're needed for is completed, to be able to step back from it. You've got them to where they are at and they have to leave now. The relationship has been altered but that's what needs to happen, that's the goal. If you have a long relationship mentoring someone, it's just being able to be like, 'Okay, we're here, we did it, great!' and then be able to change that relationship and be able to step back and let them carry on because the goal is never to hold someone by the hand and drag them. It's to show them the route and help them, encourage them, support them to make the move, to open the door and walk the path."

"It's rewarding in that sense when you see someone happy with what they have accomplished. The goal with these mentorships is the person should come out of it feeling like 'I did it by myself. It's not like someone forced me to do it, I did it.' And as a mentor, you have to be more than happy with that."

Cathy says mentoring chimes so well with community education because they're both about the same thing: encouragement.

"What it meant to me was to be there, to support and help somebody reach their potential. You're a sounding board for people as well. Sometimes that's all that somebody needs, to be able to voice their inner desires or their inner fears or something they want to tackle, and they need a bit of encouragement."

"We don't give them answers but you give them a space to open up and sometimes when they open up, the penny drops that they have the answers themselves."

The course, run by ACE in partnership with the SOAR Project, Access UCC, MTU Cork, Cork Learning Neighbourhoods, and the Cork Migrant Centre, helped Fionnuala find plenty of her own answers too.

"What I'm taking from the course is confidence in what I'm doing, inspiration from different stories, and the impact that those have had by different people in the group. Learning and hearing their experiences, their stories, even their challenges and mistakes, it made me think 'I shouldn't make those mistakes', and it taught me about that idea of shared learning. That's what I really loved about it, everybody sharing really freely and honestly."

"And understanding that there's so much going on in Cork, so many supports available. The idea of linking with people and visiting them with all the community groups – I don't even know where they're located exactly – so it gave me new eyes for the way I see Cork and the communities that exist there and the resources they have to offer."

"You can't lose from doing the course, you can only gain."



For Cathy Kelly (left), a retired literacy tutor, the Community-Based Mentoring course backed up so much of what she had been practicing over the previous 32 years. Her work was recognised with a presentation from then Lord Mayor Mick Finn at Ballyphehane-Togher Community Development Project in 2018. Picture: Diane Cusack

work with, we'd try to introduce the idea of mentorship because a lot of people in our communities, it's something they're already doing automatically. No cert, nothing needed, it's something that's so natural."

"It's just when you add the course, you add the degree, the certificate, it just solidifies that role."

Part of mentoring is simply being

and their confidence so low... and it wasn't something that happened overnight but to build up their confidence and help to develop their skills, it was great because people through the years, there was a terrible stigma attached to not being able to read or write properly."

"The students always perceived that it was something that everybody else seemed to be able to do no problem. Everywhere they

much pressure but it really does. If your response is not something that's welcoming, then that determines how people interact with certain services."

Sad paradox

Fionnuala identifies a "sad paradox" that occurs when the mentoring relationship comes to an end.

"There's that idea of not holding

Fascists, communists, and diplomats: *The politics of UCC's first adult education course*

Last October marked the 75th anniversary of UCC ACE's foundation.

It was then, in 1946, that the first-ever formalised adult education course in Ireland began, the Diploma in Social and Economic Science.

In an edited extract from his upcoming book on the history of adult education in UCC, Alan McCarthy examines how that course brought together its first class of students from a wide array of political backgrounds.



The first Diploma in Social and Economic Science class pictured by the Quad in UCC at the end of their first year in May 1947.

UCC president Alfred O'Rahilly is in the front row (centre), with Paddy Parfrey (City of Cork VEC) third from left, and Fr Jerome O'Leary directly behind O'Rahilly.

Seán Ó Dubhghaill/ Doyle sits in the front row (far left), Seán Casey is in the second row (third from the left), and Dominick F. Murphy is behind him with his left hand resting on Casey's shoulder.

as their structure began to topple. The nine local government seats won indicated that there was a pool of support that could be tapped into despite the party's proposed totalitarianism and anti-Semitism at a time when fascism had been thoroughly disavowed internationally and the utter horrors of the Holocaust began to come to light.

For context, Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists succeeded in having just one member elected to a local government body in its eight-year history; Aiséirighe had nine elected in three years within a smaller population.

The Cork City branch was most vocal in arguing that the organisation was being held back by Gearóid Ó Cuinneagáin. The *ceannaire* (leader) retaliated by suspending his critics, leading to the resignation of the Cork leaders, including Ó Dubhghaill, and an irreparable split within the movement.

Ó Dubhghaill/ Doyle subsequently stood as a candidate for the National Labour Party and advocated for the use of the Irish language by the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. National Labour was a right of centre breakaway from the Labour Party with this split also reflected in the Irish Trade Union Congress, with the Congress of Irish Unions emerging.

In December 1947, when his and James Hickey's candidacy was announced for the upcoming general election, it was recorded that Doyle had been a member of National Labour "for some time". He said that he "regarded the policy of the National Labour Party as the new road to the old objective because it stressed the complete sovereignty and unification of the Irish nation in every aspect of its economic and political life".

There is an unmistakable shift in tone and content by Doyle as he moved from the totalitarian-inspired Aiséirighe to the democratic National Labour. Whereas before he had called for the disestablishment of representative democracy, now he critiqued that "up to now two major parties came into being as a result of the civil war, and it had become the fashion for them to

The first adult education diploma course at UCC emerged during a politically polarised period and this was reflected in the diverse range of views of its initial cohort of students, as well as their instructors.

Ailtirí na hAiséirighe (Architects of the Resurrection) was a fascist organisation formed by the pro-Axis Gearóid Ó Cuinneagáin in the midst of the Second World War. Alongside advocating the creation of a totalitarian state, the group also sought to weld their anti-democratic ideology to Christianity and Gaelic culture. Proposals included creating a new capital city at the ancient seat of Irish kings, Tara in County Meath, as well as being guided exclusively by Christian values in an Irish-speaking nation.

In particular, the organisation drew inspiration from the Salazarian dictatorship in Portugal which provided an example of a nationalist, Catholic, and corporate state.

Liam de Róiste, a former TD who

was sympathetic to the movement, articulated some of the frustrations among Catholic conservatives in the midst of the Second World War: "Once more, as it seems to me, the discussions in Dáil Éireann, in this time that is admittedly serious for the people of Éire, demonstrate the futility and ineptitude of parliamentary government and the party-political system." He also wrote that "the atheist is a monstrosity among men".

Joe Nolan, a Clareman who was part of that first course, vaguely remembered classmates of his in UCC who were members, obliquely stating that the organisation had "political and language connections".

He was not wrong. Aiséirighe developed in embryonic form within the Gaelic League as Craobh na hAiséirighe (Branch of the Resurrection) which was formed by Ó Cuinneagáin with a view to consuming the Gaelic League in its entirety. This plan was subsequently abandoned and a new party, Ailtirí

na hAiséirighe, was formed.

Consisting primarily of members in their teens and twenties, the party attracted 1,200 to 1,500 members and officially had 60 branches on both sides of the Irish border. Cork was one of Aiséirighe's most active areas and the party succeeded in establishing both a Cork City branch and a UCC branch (NUIG and UCD would also form branches).

Among the new party's Cork members were future ACE diplomats Seán Ó Murchú and Seán Ó Dubhghaill.

Rebellion

Historian RM Douglas tells us that Aiséirighe resented the adulation afforded to surviving veterans of the 1916-23 revolutionary period who continued to dominate parliamentary politics and consequently Aiséirighe can be viewed within a 'youth rebellion' context to a certain degree.

At a commemorative event in 1945

for the first Dáil, Ó Dubhghaill said that "the present-day politicians had departed very far from the ideals of the men of 1916 and 1919, and from the principles of the proclamation of independence... Until the present party system was abolished and replaced by the vocational representation system, the freedom fought for in 1916 and proclaimed in 1919 would never be attained."

Ó Dubhghaill had been an unsuccessful candidate at general election time for Aiséirighe but stood in the local elections in 1945 following the argument of Aindrias Ó Riain, a prominent figure in the Cork branch, that the party needed to establish a foothold at a local level. The organisation struggled to field suitable candidates, meaning that only 31 seats were contested nationally, with the party ultimately winning nine seats. Ó Dubhghaill was one of those who succeeded and was duly elected to Cork Corporation.

Douglas argues that Aiséirighe lacked policy ideas and fell back on 'populist gestures'; Ó Dubhghaill, for example, abstained from voting for Lord Mayor of Cork City as no candidate was fully fluent in Irish.

The local success of 1945 represented a false dawn and marked the beginning of the end for the Ailtirí

oppose each other for the sake of opposition”.

Similarly, Joe Nolan’s interview in the McAuliffe Tapes references ‘Seán Doyle – whom we knew as Seán Ó Dubhghaill’ suggesting that Doyle moved away from his staunch Gaelicism of his earlier years in Aiséirighe with the anglicised version of his name appearing more regularly in the public sphere.

In 1960, Ó Dubhghaill was a member of a party called Poblacht Chriostúil (Christian Republic) which suggests once more that his political views were shaped by religion and language as opposed to social and economic policies. In the interim, much of Aiséirighe’s appeal was siphoned off by the decidedly democratic Clann na Poblachta which similarly provided a more extreme alternative to the mainstream political parties, while addressing issues like emigration, partition, religion, and the Irish language.

Democratic conversion

So, can ACE claim any credit for Doyle’s democratic conversion? Speaking at the Cork Workers’ Council in 1948 having finished the course, Doyle said that “it was absolutely necessary today that workers should understand the economic and social problems surrounding them”. His entry into National Labour coincided with his diploma course at UCC and it certainly appears that the Dunlop employee absorbed some of the ideas espoused within the course.

At a National Labour meeting, for example, he argued that “private property was not in itself wrong or unjust, but it was the misconception of the duties and the abuses of private property which brought all the misery and want to all the peoples of modern times”. In his argument and wording, Doyle echoed not only the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, but also the arguments of Hilaire Belloc, a theorist recommended to diplomates.

Despite the disturbing views expounded by Ailtirí na hAiséirighe, it is likely that Doyle and UCC president Alfred O’Rahilly would have shared some common ground; O’Rahilly viewed Ireland as an intensely Catholic country and wanted this reflected in the constitution. O’Rahilly was deeply distrustful of communism, also supported the creation of a corporate state, and was a member of the 1943 Commission on Vocationalism and used the *Standard* as a tool to promote this idea.

However, a feature of O’Rahilly’s adaptive and not readily definable politics was that he shared common ground with many groups.

Within the Labour Party, ACE diplomates Seán Casey and Dominick F. Murphy appeared to display a

more moderate ethos than more hard-left activists. Murphy recalled his amusement that the pair were mistaken for communists at a London summer school as they both wore red ties. Both Casey and Murphy were prominent within the Cork branch of the Labour Party when Michael O’Riordan, a veteran of the 15th International Brigade of the Spanish Civil War, was expelled from the party as a communist infiltrator. O’Riordan became secretary of the radical Liam Mellows branch in November 1943 but he and other left-wing members suffered as a result of “exposures and inquisitions in the pages of the *Standard*” written by Alfred O’Rahilly. O’Riordan subsequently founded the Cork Socialist Party which his colleague Derry Kelleher confirmed was a communist front.

Like Doyle, Casey and Murphy were ultimately selected for the inaugural diploma course. At the inaugural Alfred O’Rahilly memorial lecture in 2017, Fred Powell convincingly addressed the breadth of O’Rahilly’s political associations and the difficulty in defining his at-times chameleon views:

“It would be wrong to infer that O’Rahilly’s ideological orientation, which was shaped by his fervent Catholicism, defines him as a social reactionary. He was a much

more complex figure that espoused many radical educational initiatives. He was a notably reforming president of UCC, who introduced adult education and social science to the campus. His Diploma in Social Studies brought learning, social awareness, and community engagement to the Munster region. O’Rahilly was quintessentially a civic-minded president of UCC that sought to open up the University to the community. In this regard, he was a progressive, well ahead of his time.”

Willie McAuliffe, a former organiser of ACE, noted that “O’Rahilly was keen to develop the personal talents and leadership abilities of the students. Such training proved invaluable and made a major impact on the members of these urban/rural organisations; it enhanced their personal and leadership skills, thus benefiting their organisations and the entire community.”

O’Rahilly himself declared in a speech delivered in Waterford that “We do not profess to run trade unions, agricultural organisations, or small towns. That is the task of the students themselves who must be leaders and apostles in their own communities.”

One example highlighted by McAuliffe is that of Dominick F.

Murphy. Murphy had been a part of a study circle run by Fr Jerome O’Leary and Paddy Parfrey from which the original diploma course grew, marking Murphy out as one of the original pioneers. Murphy finished second in the class and was subsequently appointed secretary of the Irish Railway Clerk’s Association, a position he served in having relocated to Dublin until 1969.

Without a doubt, he would have met O’Rahilly’s leadership expectations for the diplomates – Murphy was heavily involved in the Irish Trade Union Congress and the re-unified Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), serving on the Executive Councils of both, as well as president of ICTU in 1964/5. He was also influential in the Labour Court and the Labour Party; in 1954 he was elected as a senator. Seán Casey TD and Senator Paddy Crowley were two other ACE diplomates elected to the Oireachtas in the same year. Murphy continued to serve in Seanad Éireann until 1969.

It appears one of O’Rahilly’s greatest strengths was recognising potential; Doyle, a former city councillor, left behind Aiséirighe, while Casey and Murphy became leaders of the Labour Party at a time when the direction of the party was up in the air. The development of leaders was a key objective of the diploma

course and the diverse array of political orientations within the original intake of students underlines O’Rahilly’s innate ability to sniff out leadership potential.

Ever the mediator, O’Rahilly perhaps served as a middle ground when he spoke alongside two members representing different strands of the Labour Party and National Labour Party, diplomates Seán Casey and Seán Doyle, in 1948 following their completion of the course. The organisers of the workers’ course were prudent not to be seen to be taking sides in the split between the Congress of Irish Trade Unions and Irish Trade Union Congress when selecting candidates for the first diploma course at the University.

Politically, O’Rahilly would have preferred the National Labour Party, which was affiliated to the Congress of Irish Unions, in comparison to Labour and the Irish Trade Union Congress, but Parfrey explained that with regard to candidate selection, “There is no such thing as ‘Congress’ discrimination, as has been alleged in some quarters. As far as the courses are concerned, the ‘split’ does not exist. In Cork, Limerick, and Waterford both sides have come together to pool their efforts for the benefit of the courses.”



US president John F Kennedy (centre) during his 1963 visit to Ireland with Lord Mayor of Cork Seán Casey (to Kennedy’s left, wearing mayoral chain) outside City Hall in Cork. Casey was one of three students to graduate with first-class honours from the first UCC ACE course, the Diploma in Social and Economic Science. Picture: Robert Knudsen



‘We can’t prescribe education to fit what we don’t understand’

Natasha Dromey, UCC ACE adult education and community officer, says growing up in Knocknaheeny gave her an understanding of the stigma that can exist around education.

What do you want from UCC ACE?

That’s the question Natasha Dromey puzzles over in her role as adult education and community officer, overseeing ACE’s outreach programmes. That work connects with communities across Ireland and collaborates with marginalised groups – in many cases, drawing in those who have had the least educational opportunities in their lives.

“The aim, which is ACE’s mission statement, is to bring education out to the community as well as bring it into UCC. That’s really what I do,” says Natasha. “It’s trying to broaden the reach and scope of where education can be and what it can look like for different groups within the community.

“So I do a lot of work with the Travellers, getting them back into education or getting them involved in education. We’re doing work with the prison system. We’re trying to set up a course now with people in direct provision.

“It’s about creating programmes that might work with certain groups within society. And it’s not just setting them up; it’s going out and asking them what do they want? What kinds of things would they be interested in?”

ACE has run the highly successful Diploma in Leadership in the Community for a group of Traveller women and a Sanctuary Scholarship scheme for asylum seekers and refugees. In both cases, Natasha is working to expand UCC’s offering to both communities.

She is engaging with Traveller men’s groups to explore how UCC can work for

them. ACE will run two short courses, on the histories of boxing and road bowling, to appeal to the interests of the Travelling community.

“It’s about thinking outside the box and rethinking what university education looks like... because I always think that top-down ‘we are giving you this’ doesn’t necessarily work, especially with outreach and local community groups.

“Even with the Traveller women, the tradition is you stay at home, you mind the kids, you don’t go back to school. So we were able to work around the times. When are the kids in school? Do you have to travel? You don’t have a laptop? We’ll give you a laptop. You don’t have a phone? We can do something.

“We can’t prescribe education to fit what we don’t understand. So until we understand what the need is of the community group or the minority group or the outreach centre, it’s only then we can think about how to apply the education that we have or the facilities and options that we have to fit that group the best way.”

UCC ACE is also pioneering the use of microcredits for refugees seeking asylum in Ireland’s direct provision system.

A 10-credit Mental Health and Life in Direct Provision course is being established, which students can apply to their own lives in direct provision and, if they wish to continue to UCC, can act as a bridging course onto the Certificate in Mental Health in the Community. The microcredit qualification would exempt them from 10 credits of the Certificate course, while the Sanctuary Scholarship scheme would also be available to applicants.

Natasha mentions Deborah Oniah, a sanctuary scholar who spoke to this paper in 2020 about taking the Trauma Studies course and has given guest lectures in UCC: “What she had to live with, four kids in one room... she’s very open about her own mental health struggles and she said it’s not something

that’s talked about, especially in black communities, traditionally African communities. Very similar to the Travelling community, you don’t talk about mental health.

“Suicide rates are extremely high, depression rates are massively high, and what we’re trying to do is create the module in a way that it’s not dictating to them. It’s more of an experiential here’s the theory behind it but how does it directly impact on you? How does that translate to your lives? What are the big issues we could go and try to address?

“We’re taking from modules that exist and re-envisioning them in a way that they can then be applied to other groups. They may sound like they’re very different, the Travelling community and living in direct provision, but the similarities are closer than you would ever think.”

Elitist view

Understanding is key in Natasha’s role. Listening and responding to communities’ needs.

“You have to be very cognisant of the cultural issues behind groups as well. I’m from Knocknaheeny, I’m a Northside Cork City girl, and there’s a huge stigma there about education as well when I was growing up.

“I come from that background of being mocked for wanting to go to college [Natasha went on to study at UCC and lecture on international relations, specialising on the evolution of terrorism and counter-terrorism].

“I think that benefits me having that background to say look, I’ve come from here, I know what it’s like, I know the stigma, I know what the vision is of UCC, it always had an elitist view in certain areas, like you could never go there, it’s not for us. That’s still a massive thing in certain areas and within certain groups.

“The Traveller women graduating in April is going to be huge because others will see it has been done now, it’s not strange, they weren’t stoned

out of UCC at the gates. We need more of that visibility of local groups and minority groups.”

That idea of bringing UCC further outside the college gates and into communities was hit hard during COVID. Where ACE previously ran programmes across the country, their outreach partners were decimated during the pandemic, with only one centre, in Limerick, remaining. They’re trying to return to those partners in Cavan, Longford, Meath, Tipperary, and all across the country.

“Essentially, we’re starting from scratch, which, in a way, is a good thing because we can now reimagine what outreach looks like.

How does that translate to your lives?

What are the big issues we could go and try to address?

“It doesn’t have to be the old school system of you come every week, you sit in a room. It can be blended – this is what I’m trying to work on at the moment, building options that we can go to the groups and say we have three pillars of delivery, which one suits you best?

“It’s more a case of we can work with you. Do you want a 50/50 split of half online, half in the class? Do you want all classroom? Do you want mostly online with workshops once a month? We’re trying to develop this optional delivery system that we can then slot the groups into where they feel more comfortable.”

ACE have gone from having no choice but to go online during COVID to having an abundance of choices to make. The great opportunity now is to redesign how ACE will look into the future in a way that would’ve taken years to organise before the COVID interruption.

“We’ve been given this option to tailor-make our programmes and make them

more attractive, especially to adult learners, because you’ve got people who are working full-time jobs, have families, are carers for their parents. They want to go back to education but they can’t commit themselves to be at a location every single week for two years, or a year.

“I’ve done a couple of surveys now with students in our previous outreach centres and that was one of the biggest [outcomes], they really want to do something but they don’t want to be in the classroom every week. Close to 85% of respondents would prefer a hybrid blended learning approach where they can be at home for maybe three weeks and then one week every month, they’re in the room with their classmates.

“It’s given us the freedom to do that now. That’s something we didn’t have before. A lot of our students were driving from Limerick to UCC for classes from seven to nine o’clock and getting home at 11. It was a big ask so at least now I think we’re opening up the market more to those who maybe really wanted to do something but were hesitant because of the time constraints and travelling and all that kind of stuff.”

Test the waters

That’s also where the microcredits come in. The most common issue ACE experiences with adult learners is having the confidence to return to education.

“Even if they just choose to do the 10 credits alone, they still get the entire experience of UCC. I think it’s a brilliant way to get people engaged in the process. They’re earning a credit and they’re earning an award but they don’t necessarily have to sign up for a whole programme and dedicate themselves to that straight away.

“You can test the waters. You may come and do one, you may pass and get your cert and think it’s not for me, but that still stands to you and you’ve got on your wall or in your cupboard UCC parchment that says you’ve completed something.”

Initiatives like the recognition of prior learning, acknowledging the lessons gained in non-university settings, are also important in broadening UCC’s responsiveness to society. Who could deny the immense practical expertise a stay-at-home parent has gained in childcare, healthcare, education, nutrition, budgeting, logistics, project management... the list goes on.

The aim, which is ACE’s mission statement, is to bring education out to the community as well as bring it into UCC.

Natasha also points to the potential international appeal of ACE in the digital age, with students from 13 countries having studied on an ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) microcredit course. She hopes to set up a microcredit course for LGBTQIA+ groups too.

Speaking the day before her third anniversary in the job, Natasha says the biggest challenge among the endless possibilities of potential courses is narrowing down where to start.

“Word of mouth, especially in communities and within minority groups, is huge. One bad programme taints the reputation of ACE. That’s why I’m trying to put as much time in to really get to know the groups and meet with them first and work from the bottom up and make sure that we’re not missing anything.

“I mean, taking the direct provision, I’ve never lived in direct provision, I don’t know what it’s like, I don’t know what areas of mental health are impacting on them the most. We have to be so careful in making sure that what we give is what they need and what they want.”

That will always be the goal. To reach out to communities, listen, understand, and provide that space where education is for all.

'We'd never say we were students of UCC. We thought this wasn't our world'

Biddy McDonagh never mentioned she was a UCC student at the start. Nobody in her class did. For Biddy and her Diploma in Leadership in the Community classmates, they felt they didn't belong in UCC; that the description 'UCC student' didn't fit.

Fast-forward two and a half years and one pandemic to April 2022 and 19 Traveller women received their diplomas in a conferring ceremony at UCC. That description of 'UCC students' has now been updated to 'UCC graduates'.

The innovative Level 7 course was designed and delivered in partnership between the Southern Traveller Health Network and UCC ACE in order to overcome many of the issues Travellers have experienced in education. A trusting relationship was built between Traveller organisations and the University. A safe and supportive learning environment was created for students. The course was organised around school times. Financial barriers were removed with a maintenance grant to cover costs. Laptops were provided

when COVID forced classes to move online. When commuting and parking issues were raised, the classes were switched to Mallow to accommodate students travelling longer distances from Kerry and Charleville.

It took a while but Biddy now says with pride she's a part of UCC.

"That's what we thought at the start, we didn't belong in UCC. It took us all a while to say that we were actually students of UCC because when we moved to Mallow, we were saying we were going to the Leadership course in Mallow.

"We'd never mention UCC until our support Ann Burke and Ann-Marie Rogan said, 'You know ye are students of UCC so don't be embarrassed or ashamed to say that'. It wasn't that we were embarrassed or ashamed to say it but we thought this wasn't our world and we didn't have the right to use that.

"But now we know that we are students of UCC and we did as good as other people. We did our best to get there. Just to take that confidence with us that UCC now is a part of us... It's not this big, daunting, frightening place that you just pass the gates and you see students of all ages and all backgrounds coming and going.

UCC is theirs

"We know now that any one of our children or grandchildren or any member of the Traveller community that wants to take up a course, UCC is theirs. It's a part of them as well. It belongs to the Traveller community now as much as it belongs to the wider community."

It's been a long journey through, and often despite, the education system to get this far. Each has their own individual stories of exclusion, racism, and segregation.

Biddy attended a Traveller-only school in the late '60s and early '70s, a time when her family lived in camps on the side of the road.

"We were in special schools... Where I went was an old abandoned school in a convent. Education wasn't a priority for our parents, to be honest with you. The only priority was trying to keep us warm and fed because we were just in tents at the side of the road.

"We were bussed in in the morning and girls my age would be there mostly to look after the smaller siblings in school so we never really got a chance of learning. In one way, it was good for our parents because we got fed and we got washed inside in school because we hadn't got the facilities at home. That was one thing I really hated being done

to me – being stripped and washed by the nuns.

"Even through all that, I loved every aspect of learning. I always did. But I could never get a chance."

Biddy left school after her Confirmation at 12 years old to help her mother raise the rest of the children, as was common for Traveller girls at the time. "When we left at 12, we didn't know how to read. We barely could do a small little child's book; we might do a few words of it. We didn't really learn anything."

Biddy's love of education never waned. She joined a training centre in Ennis to learn to read and write. A decade ago, she completed her Leaving Cert Applied and went on to work as a primary healthcare worker with the Cork Traveller Visibility Group – a role she continues in to this day.

Her education experiences shaped her as a mother too.

"When I got married and had my own children when we moved to Cork, I was saying that the experience I went through in school, I would never let my children go through it. So I would put a stop to them being stripped and washed inside in school. I didn't allow that and I would put on their uniforms myself. I wouldn't allow the uniforms to be brought into the school [to be washed], small things like that but it was stuff that affected my-

self when I was young.

"I didn't want my children to be taken out and brought into special classes. I wanted them to have the same opportunities as other children had."

Her goal was for her eight children to go a step further in education and complete their Junior Cert. All eight hit that target, "and when my eight children did the Junior Cert, it wasn't very many Travellers completing their Junior Cert," Biddy adds. The next goal was the Leaving Cert, a milestone that four of her children achieved.

As Biddy knows, education is a lifelong journey. Her encouragement of academic achievement continues, backed up by her own UCC experience, for her son who has just gone back to college. And for the next generation too.

"We can do it. Although we came from a background where education wasn't a priority, now it is a priority among our community, among the young people coming up. As a mother and a grandmother, I can encourage my children and my grandchildren to go as far as they can in education.

"We're able to pass what we have learned in our Leadership [diploma] down to our children. My son has gone back to college to do Youth and Community and because we're after doing the community development diploma, we can encourage him and I can give him support to do what he's doing. How we look at education now is starting to shift."

It's a shift experienced within the group too. Another woman has progressed from the Leadership diploma to also take on the Youth and Community Work degree.

"She got the confidence to be able to go back in a mixed group, settled and Travellers, and that was all through her getting confidence from the Leadership programme," says Biddy. "It does actually give you energy and it gives you confidence then to be able to go, 'Yes, we can do that'.

"You have nothing if you haven't education. Like I would

have said to my own children growing up, they might do nothing with it now but there will come a time that they may want to do something with their education.

"I'm 60 years old now and I've just finished the Leadership programme so my own daughters are looking at me being able to do that, and they can do it. It's hard enough for everyone to get employment but if you haven't got a piece of paper that you're qualified, whatever it is, you're getting nowhere. For positive change to come, education is the way that it's going to come for the Traveller community."

That's where the course comes into its own. "The topics that we were covering were all relevant to our own backgrounds, our own community, what was happening in the Traveller community. It was all relevant: the lack of education, the lack of employment, and the lack of equality for the Traveller community. So we were well able for the assignments because we knew all the topics and we knew where the topics were coming from.

"We had great support within the group and our tutors from UCC and ACE, they were great supports. Sindy Joyce was a great support and a great role model. This is a Traveller woman coming in teaching other Traveller women and she was a doctorate in her field. So we were able to look up to her and do it."

That was the aim of the Leadership in the Community course from the beginning, to create the next generation of Traveller leaders who can advocate on their own behalf and for the rights of the community.

"We hope for positive change for our community so that's why we're encouraging them to be able to speak for their community and stand up and speak for their rights without feeling this is not their place to do it, they don't belong in this place."

As with UCC, it's a place they now truly belong.

Picture Credit: Provision



continued from page 9

Completely different

If Pat was more than happy to leave school at 15, he was beyond delighted to show up those evenings.

“It was completely different [to my previous school experience]. I was learning things that I never even knew existed like sociology. I was amazed by the insights and critical thinking that you could get from studying those subjects: psychology, sociology, social policy, how laws were made... It gave me a huge insight into how society works. It’s something that I’ve never lost.”

He got his diploma in 1997 but found the same problem: there was nowhere to progress. Or if there was, he didn’t know about it. He was working away as a bus driver but couldn’t see his next stop in the classroom.

In the end, he decided on a full-time course at UCC. The diploma gave him a one-subject exemption for the Bachelor of Arts degree – three subjects instead of four – so he applied for that. The Social Science degree was his second choice. For whatever reason, he wasn’t granted his first choice but got the second and Pat was a UCC student.

“I remember the first day on campus, they gave us an orientation tour, and I was saying to myself, ‘Well, it’s only a matter of time before they realise who I am and I’ll probably be asked to leave.’

“Even though I had got good marks in the diploma, I still thought that

taking that step from the diploma to the degree was so big that I wouldn’t be able for it but I was fine. I sailed through it actually.

“I think when you like something, it just makes it that little bit easier, and I liked a lot of the subjects.”

He finished it three years later in 2000. Approaching his 50th birthday, Pat was a UCC graduate.

“I was thinking that if I stop now, I’ll never go back. So I decided to continue on and I applied for a Master’s in Social Work.”

He finished that in one year and decided to drive on. The PhD was next.

All the while, Pat found new doors were opening for him. He wanted to move away from bus driving and when he got his master’s, he was hired by Oscail, DCU’s distance education unit. He got teaching work in CIT and WIT too. In 2006, he finished his PhD. The School of Applied Social Studies weren’t about to let him go, though. They offered him a job: half lecturer, half student support officer.

“They had a lot of mature students in the School of Applied Social Studies and the University had a commitment to taking on so much mature students. And because our department had the majority of the mature students in the University, they were trying to make sure that the mature students didn’t feel in any way disadvantaged or that they would be dropping out.”

Life knowledge

In that, they had the perfect role model in Pat – a man whose own experiences not only provided the perfect cheat sheet of pathways and pitfalls but who developed his own practical knowledge into research on widening participation and increasing retention rates in education. His previous school and life experience never left him all along his journey, and he never forgot the impact he could have on others travelling the same route.

“The University can be a frightening experience for people who have been out of the educational system for a long time. The supports that we were giving to mature students at that time, they needed that support just to get a belief in themselves as well. A lot of the time, it’s just self-doubt and ‘Am I able for this?’

“If you can get people over the first year, they sail away then. It’s in the initial period that they might feel a lot of the younger students coming in from Leaving Cert seem to have all the knowledge but what mature students don’t realise is that their life knowledge probably outweighs or equals the academic knowledge that the students have. Particularly in the social sciences, life knowledge can be very beneficial.

“My main job was just to give people a belief in themselves. It wasn’t telling people how to do this or how to do that, or they should do this or they should do that, but trying to instil in them that they’re well able for this and that they won’t have any difficulties. When they get through the first few ex-

ams or assignments, people come to believe in themselves that maybe they are in the right place and at the right time.”

And then, when his right time came, Pat retired. He says it with a chuckle. It wasn’t a retirement that lasted too long. UCC ACE director Séamus Ó Tuama and Cathal O’Connell made an approach in 2018. The Diploma in Social Studies, which had lain dormant for the previous five years, was being revived and revitalised. There were new progression routes. Students who completed it could go straight into the second year of the Bachelor of Social Science. They wanted Pat to take the lead as course co-ordinator.

“I said I’d love to be involved with it. So they gave me the job of co-ordinating it and here we are... That was in 2018 and we’re just going into the fourth year of the course now.”

Each year they’ve had a full complement of over 30 students. From the first intake, seven progressed onto the Social Science degree and are due to graduate this autumn. Last year, 15 advanced into the degree course – half the diploma’s entire intake. Pat keeps an eye on them all, staying in contact where he can to make sure they’re doing well and still enjoying their learning road.

“It’s really interesting co-ordinating that course because I meet so many students who were like myself at the start. If there was a progression route like that, I’d have got into it a lot quicker.

“We never stop learning, whether we’re a lecturer or whether we’re a student, it’s the game of life really, learning.”

The revival of the course was an important achievement for UCC ACE too. The history of the diploma goes all the way back to 1946 when it was the founding course for UCC adult education, then called the Diploma in Social and Economic Science.

The content is much the same as when Pat first studied it in the ‘90s. He says the modules are broadly similar and the lecturing pool remains top-class. He did a history of the diploma as part of a project while studying it back then. The list of graduates featured politicians, ministers, businesspeople, and academics. He interviewed graduates, including Jim Kemmy, a TD who brought down the Government in 1982 and after whom the UL Business School is named.

Pat, like Jim Kemmy, is now part of the history of that course. Four years into ‘retirement’, his education journey continues.

Supplying the Springboard for job-seekers and returning students

Targeted at those unemployed or in precarious employment, Springboard+ courses are free for job-seekers and returners to education, while those in employment receive a 90% fee subsidy. With a strong industry focus and dedicated support for adult learners, the courses are as highly rated by graduates as those graduates are sought-after by employers.

This year has seen an increased careers support input for students and optional monthly webinars run for applicants to ask questions in order to help make the application process as smooth as possible. Almost 60 people attended the March event.

The courses cover a range of topics from digital skills to industry, engineering to pharma, environment to health and safety, and languages to project management.

Here, those involved in running the programme and studying on it give their perspectives.

The senior skills programme co-ordinator

Lorna Moloney

“My role has been with Springboard since 2013. It’s actually quadrupled in student size, growing to 330 students and 12 to 16 courses. We’re very successful at retention – we retain 93% of the students – and that just doesn’t happen. That’s a clear path of engagement and making sure that students are contacted and kept in touch with, that they’re never really left off the grid. When I notice if they’re not engaging, I would liaise with all the lecturers and the teams to ensure that they are not running into difficulties as adult learners who may be frightened coming back to education or feel overwhelmed because of a lot

of the changes that have gone on. So we didn’t just have COVID to cope with over the years, we had the crash and the impact of that afterwards, a lot of homelessness, a lot of suicide. I’m looking at the coalface.

“It’s very much on the pulse of what’s going on industrially. It’s highly adaptable and it reflects the needs of the market. My job is to identify those needs and to make sure that we’re getting the right fit of student who’s able to take up the courses so that they can get the best way of upskilling and reskilling and moving across platforms into new domains of work because work itself is changing so much outside of any skill set that you might have.”

Application process: “We run online webinars each month before even the courses are announced to help people engage with the criteria of what Springboard is about.



Ken O’Mahony is looking to break into the pharmaceutical industry by returning to study the Certificate in Operator Development (Pharma Manufacturing) through Springboard+.

To gain entry you mightn’t have this standard Leaving Cert, you mightn’t have this standard FETAC Level 7, and we’re very personal in UCC in the fact that we attach a lot of importance with personally speaking to each one of our potential candidates.

“There’s no target audience as such, we don’t vet like that. It’s open to any learner. We do as a part of the programme prioritise unemployed returners and formerly self-employed. They pay no fee whatsoever. The employed pay 10% of their fees. So it’s very attractive funding

for people that want to gain skills and may not have the resources or their employers may not be backing them to upskill or reskill financially. It's certainly very rewarding on that part.

"We're particularly interested to make sure that returners, people coming back into education after having caring duties or maybe during caring duties, to make sure that they're looked after because that can be almost impossible if a man or woman has been out of any type of employment or any type of education for an employer to look at their CV. Springboard finds that springboard for them to gain access into the employability space and the confidence to realise that they're 50 and their life isn't over at all, they're very attractive to employers because very often it's the negative portrayal of themselves that causes the problems, not the age. No one's asking, 'are you 49 or are you 59?'"

Recognising strengths: "I'm given to mind with an anecdote of my father, who's nearly 90 and he was in his early 80s when my stepmother died. My stepmother got brain cancer and she ended up 13 days in the hospice because my father managed her single-handedly to look after all her medication. I was going in putting in the big wellington boots: 'I'll help you, daddy. You won't be alone now.' And he said, 'I'm grand. Sure I worked as an orderly in a hospital in 1952 doing nights for five years, loveen. I'm used to dispensing medicine for hundreds of people.' All that came back.

"It's trying to give people the realisation that skills don't disappear, they fade, but if you have that hospital training... Think about the skill set. It's not just giving a few tablets out. It's remembering what tablet, what time, where, who, how, its hundreds of people. So it's trying to get people to tap into, 'What did you do and can you give me an example of where you did well? Did you like that?' If people like something they tend to do well at it."

Job security: "I have it all the time where I have students that didn't finish Springboard because they got a job and then they come back when they're let go. I take them back. I've flip flops, the whole lot. I don't have any problem because people make mistakes on courses all the time. I wouldn't have a heavy hand, 'Oh, you didn't finish with us so we're not giving you another chance.' I'm not the fairy with the wand at all so if it's a valid reason I go, 'Okay, try it again.' And they do succeed because they realise, 'Oh my God, I made an error there. I didn't upskill and get the actual qualification so now I'm superfluous to requirements to someone who has the qualification.'"

Barriers: "You've got people who are coming in, they're employed and they're doing a course because deep down inside they're very lacking in confidence, even though they're not presenting like that. There's a defensiveness, there's a wall up because they've suddenly realised they haven't got qualifications in the workplace and it's coming against them. 'But I haven't a degree, you know. It wasn't there in

my time.' You're going, 'We know that but this is exactly what this is about. This is about reskilling, upskilling, and transferring skills.

"You see them turn into different people. At the end of the year, they've lost that defensive wall around them. They're able to work and achieve. They're able to go, 'Ara sure them young ones, they're not so bad. They've got a few bits of paper but I am actually well able.' The barriers break down and then they're going into the employment place different people. They don't have this baggage that they had from not having qualifications of a formal variety and that's perceived baggage. Nobody ever said to them they weren't able to do X, Y, Z but they feel it internally. They realise, 'I have a huge amount to offer. I don't have to be threatened by this new space.'"

The stats: "You find them getting promoted very quickly. 25% of them get promoted in pharma that are already existing in employment, within a year.

"Everything benefits them being part of a wonderful University and the minute they've got UCC on their CV, their possibility of getting an interview goes up. We have a 91% employment rate on the Certificate of Operator Development and the other 9%, most of them went on to further study."

Springboard+: "It came from very meagre beginnings and it's become such a well-thought-of programme. The programme has provided a great deal of opportunity for people to move into spaces that they wouldn't have maybe thought that they could, or didn't think that they have the right age cohort for, or didn't think they would be able to manage."

Support: "There are absolutely unbelievable supports. I'm not there trying to teach them how to write essays, there's a whole sector devoted to that which gives them a wealth of confidence. They've got a very strong University behind them, robust and a strong team. I know this because I did my Springboard in another college so I know what we offer compared to other colleges and what we offer for careers and support is amazing. Nobody came near me even though the course I was on was absolutely fantastic and I loved the lecturers to bits but on a Springboard basis, it wasn't at the races compared to what we do in UCC and I could see why their attrition was so high.



Lorna Moloney, Springboard+ Co-ordinator

Their retention is 75% and ours is 93%.

"Staff change as well and in uncertain times which we've had, a bulk of lecturers out and a bulk of students out and whole families down with COVID, that 93% is amazing. It's like gold."

The careers consultant placement manager

Adrian Pender

"There are three main focus areas for me when I'm dealing with the Springboard students. One area would be one-to-one career advice and coaching. I'd speak to them on a one-to-one basis on what areas they want to talk about or what areas they have concerns or issues or supporting them generally.

"The second area would be providing webinars or employability workshops so there are various webinars within our programme to do with networking and basic practical skills like interview skills and job application writing in terms of CV and cover letters. It's basically getting them as ready as possible to hopefully grab the opportunities when they arise.

"The third thing would be I work with other academic departments and the other career services here on campus to provide access to them for work placements, work experience opportunities, and graduate employment and postgraduate opportunities as well."

Building confidence: "I'm a coach originally before this role and what you're trying to do is you're trying to normalise things, normalise the fact that you mightn't be the most confident now because you've been out for years. You're returning to employment and that might be a bit intimidating but you can normalise that. Education always gives confidence so once they get going, get studying, and get support from ourselves in Career Services, that confidence grows.

"But everything we do helps them build confidence indirectly. It's mastery enactment. If you do it, you'll look back and say, 'Oh yeah, I'm just after doing that. I'm just after doing the first assignment. I scored well.' So you're starting to master it and your confidence is growing – that's why these courses are brilliant – and by the time they're finished it, they're right up there in terms of their confidence and skills and they're certainly in a better position and frame of mind to attack the job market."

Unexpected benefits: "You're getting the education and the expertise in your particular field but there's a whole range of other transferable skills associated with it as well. Teamwork, confidence growth, greater self-awareness because you're more aware of your complete skill set, hard skills and soft skills, which are very important in the workplace.

continued on next page



SPRINGBOARD AT UCC

FREE COURSES FOR JOB-SEEKERS

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“Some students might only realise the skill set they’re gaining later on down the road. Opportunities come out of it that mightn’t exactly be what you intended starting the programme. Certainly, I’ve seen it and I’ve experienced it myself because I was in industry for years and I left and started working for myself. I was in an unregulated industry so I actually availed of a Springboard course, it was the degree in Pharma Business Operations, just to get greater knowledge of that side of the fence, the regulated industry, and I did a BA in that.

“What happened then was I was doing part-time lectures in UCC but I then broke gradually into the pharma side of it. Then I was lecturing pharmaceutical companies around the country with the ACE department. Now I didn’t intend or know that at the time but that’s the benefit I got out of doing a Springboard course and I’m sure I wouldn’t be the only one who’d be in that bracket. It opens doors in

ways that people mightn’t realise when they’re embarking on a programme.”

The student – Certificate in Operator Development (Pharma Manufacturing)

Ken O’Mahony

“I’m 36 this year. I originally studied Graphic Design in CIT when I was 18. The recession hit so I was working in retail for a while and then I went to Apple for the bones of 10 years doing tech support for the iPhone. I left there around the summer of 2019. I worked in the Bons for a few months and then COVID hit.

“During COVID, I took the time really to say, ‘Right, what am I going to do next?’ When I decided to leave Apple, I had gone to a career guidance counsellor. She had told me about the course. I read up on it a little bit more and was talking to friends that are in the pharma industry. They were saying how

good the course was, especially for getting into that industry, and I was lucky enough to get on the course.”

Introduction: “It’s been great because I didn’t know what to expect really. I knew what the modules would be but I didn’t know how they would apply to the course and to the industry. We did a module on personal effectiveness and the first week or two it was kind of confusing why we were doing it because it was all about your behaviour in the workplace and who you are as a person. But as the weeks went on, I was able to see how it was preparing you for the type of people that they want working in these pharma plants, all-rounders and emotionally developed.

“Then the main pharma part, that module was a good two months and it was very interesting. We covered a lot from the research to the development to the global trials to even things like drug reactions, how they’re made. It was really insightful and it gave a really good index

of how the whole industry runs.”

Career Services: “I’ve been in contact with the careers support department a good bit because I had interviews for some of the pharma places over the past two months. They were great; they gave a lot of insight on how to polish up my CV and get more active on LinkedIn. We have a module with the careers department so it’s the same kind of thing that I’ve been in contact with them for, preparing for interviews and practice rounds.”

Skills Centre: “I also use the Skills Centre because I hadn’t written any sort of assignment in years so it was great to get advice and feedback from them. Even with assignments that I had done and was happy with my grade, I still contacted the Skills Centre and asked where could I have improved or changed things a bit. It’s been really good, really enjoyable.”

Interviews: “I have no previous experience in that industry so it’s

been a slight disadvantage but when I tell them in the interview what we’re doing and what we’re studying, they know then that you know what you’re talking about. It seems that a lot of the pharma industry places almost prefer someone that didn’t have any pre-system experience because they can teach it from scratch. You’re not coming with any bad habits or anything like that.”

Insight: “I’ve been wanting to do it for years and had it in my head that the only options were to go back to full-time education. I didn’t really know the full extent of Springboard so that’s been brilliant because there’s only one night a week and the odd Saturday every few weeks. I’d definitely recommend it from that perspective and the course itself, there’s so much information within the course and for the industry but then as well as that, you learn about yourself. Especially the personal effectiveness, I found it really good, really insightful.”

Safety net: 30 years taking care of workers’ health



Academic director John Gallagher says the biggest success of UCC’s Diploma in Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work is the roll call of graduates ensuring Ireland’s very safe industrial sector remains that way.

he has no intention of stepping away from private practice (he’s founder and managing director of both Cognate Health and Employment Health Advisers) or UCC just yet.

John’s entire career in occupational health, like the Diploma itself, traces its roots directly back to the Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work Act, 1989. As much as the world and workplace have transformed and the course content has evolved over his years as academic director, the fundamental principles and theory haven’t changed since then.

That Act overtook the outdated, overly specific acts that preceded it – the likes of the Factories Act, the Mines and Quarries Act, and the Offices, Shops, and Railway Premises Act – which covered only the minority of the workforce. People outside those narrow categories operated beyond legislative protection: those in agriculture; the self-employed; and emerging industries like pharmaceuticals, biomedical sciences, and IT.

The new umbrella legislation applied to all workplaces. “It was putting the onus on employers to manage the health and safety rather than waiting for the factory inspector to come. That was the big change,” says John, a UCC Medicine graduate.

“The Barrington Report recommended that in order to help employers, there’ll be a whole new breed of health and safety professionals and there would be

a requirement then for courses in health and safety around the country. It was a direct offshoot of that in producing people who had competencies to help employers to cope with the new legislation, and it was very successful in doing that.”

The first intake of students laid the groundwork, launching their health and safety consultancy careers and providing safety statements for employers.

The course, initially run every second year, grew from 25 to 30 students to an annual cohort of 70 to 80 during the heady days of the Celtic Tiger, with a complimentary Construction Diploma, tailored to the needs of that booming industry, added. The crash brought an end to the latter but the general Diploma continued to go from strength to strength, adding an introductory Certificate programme and a Master’s for those seeking further expertise. The Diploma now averages between 40 and 50 students, with over 60 more taking on the Certificate this year. They offer a natural progression to guide health and safety professionals throughout their careers.

The future

The Master’s had already made the move to online delivery before COVID. The Diploma, which runs two evenings per week, was under consideration to follow but COVID hastened that switch. John describes it as “remote delivery of the same lecture content” for now but with projects being undertaken to em-

brace the technology to best recreate the classroom setting.

“The future is without doubt online. Or blended (part online, part classroom) but predominantly online, without a doubt,” says John. “It particularly suits adult learning and the Diploma in Health and Safety. All these people have got day jobs, no more than the lectures.

“We’re planning for next year on the Certificate course, for example, giving them pre-recorded material that they can do on their own time in the week before the lecture. Then use a shorter lecture time, maybe an hour or so, in a much more interactive way. And in the interim, interacting with them in discussion groups, etc.

“You’re using the whole week instead of just getting three hours twice a week. That’s the downside of having to go to UCC. The upside is you’ve face-to-face networking. That’s the biggest challenge for online courses, trying to recreate that human-to-human contact. How do we recreate the classroom online? But it’s possible to go a great deal of the way towards recreating that in online classes.

“So the future, no doubt, is online. You make much better use of your time and, I think, get a better education experience at the end of it.”

Especially so for those students who have previously travelled from the likes of Limerick, Waterford, and Tralee to Cork ev-

John Gallagher has been running UCC’s Diploma in Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work for 30 years. Now he’s preparing it for a new direction for the

next 30 years or more.

He may be planning his retirement from the HSE, where he is head of the Occupational Health Department for HSE South, but

ery Tuesday and Thursday. And with the added benefit of expanding the potential audience beyond Munster too.

“The online experience, when it’s set up properly, is perfect for this group. They’re working all day. They can do some in the morning. They can do some when they come home. They can do it during the week. They can chip away at it, as opposed to having to commit to three hours twice a week and then closing the book on it until next time.”

For all that COVID has changed teaching methods, has it changed the course content? “Not so much,” explains John, “because we teach the important general principles in templates. It ties into whatever disease. Biological agents are one of the things we’ve covered for a very long time. COVID is one of those, so once you teach people how to prevent biological risk in the workplace, they can apply it to anything that comes their way, be it COVID 1, 2, 3, or 4.”

Other events have changed the course over the past three decades.

“As your traditional workplace hazards like noise, the various poisonings, and dust exposure became very well controlled with the technology, and, of course, with the input of our now very competent health and safety officers in the workplace, they have been replaced by more modern-day hazards which include psychosocial risks, stress, and lifestyle issues in the workplace. Things like obesity and cardiovascular disease are now impacting on the workplace in terms of productivity and attendance. That’s been the big change in terms of the content of the course that we deliver.

“We still cover off the traditional hazards but in the modern Irish workplace, they’re of less relevance given that over 70% of the Irish industrial sector is services. That’s reflected in the makeup of the courses. So a lot of psychosocial, much more health promotion, much more total worker health. It’s looking at the worker not just from the occupational disease point of view but as sort of a mixture of lifestyle issues and non-work-related diseases. So lots of psychosocial stuff and lots of ergonomics and it’s likely to be that way as we move forward.

“The whole thrust of the course remains around prevention – preventing, preventing, preventing – and we teach people a template of how to prevent anything so they can apply that no matter what. It could be chemical X, it

could be dust Y, it could be psychosocial hazards or anything else, it’s the same principles of prevention that apply.”

It gives graduates a grounding across a range of disciplines, running in association with UCC’s departments of Applied Psychology, Biochemistry, Civil and Environmental Engineering, Law, Applied Social Studies, Statistics, Medicine and Health, and the Industrial Liaison Unit.

So what has been the biggest success of the course?

“It’s the product of the course really,” says John. “We’ve got a really safe industrial sector, locally and nationally, and that’s certainly as a result, in no small way, of the competency of the people that are coming out of the courses.

“The other thing is it’s great to meet people flourishing in their careers, be it in the health and safety arena or another arena, because having that fundamental safety management knowledge will stand to you regardless of what job you’re in.

“And, of course, to see the great demand for the course year on year. To me, that’s been the great joy of it. I love the adult learning piece of it because you’re dealing with people with real-life experience. You see people bringing a great appetite to network with their colleagues and to share their experiences. Blending that experience with the academic work becomes a very powerful mix.”

There’s one more thing that hasn’t changed in John’s decades as academic director. “Over the 30 years, I’ve always looked forward to the onset of autumn and getting back into UCC and going doing the lectures.”

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Addiction Studies a vital support on recovery roadmap

Mark O’Keeffe picks up the phone just after completing his third day as a full-time addiction counsellor with Tabor Lodge in Cork. “I’m wrecked,” he says, when offered congratulations, with the hearty laugh of a man enjoying his new workload. It’s been an exceptionally busy week but amid it all, he’s more than happy to take the time to chat through his ACE experience and explain how it led him to his dream job.

For Mark, this all started 10 years ago when he decided to tackle his own alcohol dependency. A chef all his life, he found that his career was exacerbating his addiction.

“I came out of hotels and restaurants because I had a serious alcohol dependency and I started down the road of change. It took a year or two of relapsing constantly but I had to get out of the industry because there’s a lot of substance misuse in hotel/restaurant settings,” he says.

“So I moved into homeless services and that’s where it started for me.”

He began his education journey five years ago with the long-term goal of that dream job in mind but plagued by the common doubts of inadequacy in a classroom setting.

“I had a clear roadmap of where I wanted to go when I started the process of change. I always knew that addiction counselling is where I wanted to end up.

“I started down the academic route full of the imposter syndrome and self-doubt and ‘would I be able for the academic side of things?’ I had a lot of anxiety

around, you know, I was 40 going back as a mature student and a dad and someone working full-time but it definitely took away any anxiety that I had around going back to college.

“Ciara [Staunton], Rob [O’Driscoll], and Rebekah [Brennan] made it very possible at the start. That was definitely a big plus point.”

He had gained confidence through a couple of certificate courses and by doing the one-year Certificate in Addiction Studies through Maynooth University before signing up for UCC’s Diploma in Substance Misuse and Addiction Studies in 2019. The course requires applicants in recovery to be two years post-treatment and Mark can see why.

“The whole education journey is very triggering, especially coming from an addiction background, so I could fully understand why they have those rules and regulations in there.”

Passion

Mark took it module by module, semester by semester, and took every offer of support coming his way.

“Another big plus point was that they had the study group the hour before the lectures with Rebekah. That was an additional thing – I think it’s unique to UCC actually, that they have that study group. It’s not compulsory but I don’t think I missed one.

“Rebekah was always there for hints and tips with essay writing, all the different styles of writing, and it made it very accessible along the way.

“It was continuous assessment so you’ve an idea going along how

you’re performing and if you need to tweak different areas, that’s where Rebekah’s stuff came in. If you were struggling at one aspect of the academic side, there was always plenty of scope there for help along the way.

“I had an awful lot of support and I took a lot of inspiration from all the lecturers because they were working during the day and they were going out of their way to get up to [St Mary’s Health Campus in Gurrabraher] through peak-time traffic.

“There was always a nice vibe. Everyone was there because they wanted to be there. That passion, through the staff and everything... it was very energetic all the time. It was a really nice experience.”

Mark’s Diploma in Substance Misuse and Addiction Studies, collected at a graduation ceremony last November, has helped to open doors for him. It now hangs, framed, on the office wall in his private practice on Friar’s Walk, which he got up and running in a doctor’s surgery the same month as graduating. A double celebration for the Douglas native.

“[The doctor] was very impressed with the course because I had just got qualified, just got insurance, just accredited, and her being in the medical field, she doesn’t know me at all, but I got that office on the strength of my academic qualification so far.”

And that qualification allowed him to advance to the final year of the ICHAS (Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences) Counselling and Psychotherapy degree.

“Again, because of that UCC course, ICHAS took the recognised prior learning points, because of the weight that particular course carries, and I was able to get into fourth year. So again, from a financial aspect, the weight of that course got me past first year, second year, third year, because of the modules and what we had covered.

“I’m only about four weeks from finishing my degree so I’ll have a full Bachelor’s degree in Psychotherapy Counselling with Addiction. But the whole addiction piece was covered in the UCC course and basically, this whole year now has been the psychotherapy piece.

“So again, it shows how well thought of it is in the services. When people see that you have that completed and got good results in all the assignments, it really stands to you.”

continued on page 22

Safety, Health and Welfare Student voices

“Don’t be afraid to take the first step because you’ll be glad you did. I got enormous satisfaction and enjoyment and friendships that’ll last for a lifetime – things I would’ve never imagined I would’ve got out of the course.”

- Ger Fitzgerald

“It is achievable and third-level encourages you, it’s not to catch you out or try to trip you. The whole structure of assignments and exams are just so that you get a grasp of the subject.”

- Vincent Murphy

“It’s not as difficult as it looks. Once you get into it, you ride the wave. It’s easier as it goes. The course and the experience I got on placement opened doors for me.”

- Tobi Bashiru

The human cost of a war against war

In her native Ukraine, Larysa Samosonok rebuilt a war-torn university from scratch and now helps hundreds of businesses to survive along the frontlines of Russian attacks despite constant setbacks. In March, she was forced to flee to Cork with her daughter but her work continues.

Larysa Samosonok is speaking on the far side of the horrors in Ukraine, from the relative safety of Cork, but she carries those horrors with her.

She carries them with her in her work as director of a Ukrainian NGO, helping those still on the ground, and she carries them with her in her care for her daughter, who has also experienced the horrors of war throughout her teenage years.

So much of what Larysa has worked for, what her charity has worked to build, has been destroyed by the latest Russian offensive – what she derisively calls their “war against war”. But just as the horrors endure, the Ukrainian spirit remains unbroken. She works hour by hour trying to help businesses to relocate and to protect families’ income streams in a wartime economy. Any slower and it’s too late. Equipment, facilities, goods destroyed by a rocket from above.

She is used to creating a way where previously there was none. She was one of “three crazy women” who rebuilt a university from scratch in 2014, moving it to a new city without resources, without funding, without so much as a suitable building to house it, and without any precedent for what they were doing. But they did it.

There are endless new starts. She has had to evacuate her home three times, ending in a 72-hour drive to the border in freezing cold weather and a flight to Cork to escape the Russian invasion. She and her daughter Viktoriia (19) now stay in the home of Séamus Ó Tuama, director of UCC ACE, who Larysa first met all the way back in 1995.

Донецьк (Donetsk): 1988-2014

The story of what happened in Donetsk, and has since spread across Ukraine, starts long before the 2014 annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas.

Larysa first moved to Donetsk in 1988, when it was still part of the Soviet Union, still tucked away behind the Iron Curtain. She was hired by the Donetsk National University of Economics and Trade, through which she first worked with Séamus Ó Tuama as he came to Ukraine to develop a joint European project in third-level education. They worked on several European projects from then to 2004 and remained friends ever since.

It was a friendship she would’ve never thought, 27 years later,

would be called on in a time of international crisis.

“I lived in Donetsk from 1988 ‘til 2014 and I saw everything with my own eyes and all processes of separatism were organised by criminal elements from Russia,” Larysa says. She pauses in her telling of the story only momentarily to check her pronunciation, and each time it’s a word that gives a pixel of that story: spies, damage, deficit, fear.

That first word, spies, is in reference to the “huge network” of spies Vladimir Putin, himself a former KGB agent, has implanted in Ukraine, sowing so much misinformation and confusion in the Donbas region, which contains Donetsk and Luhansk. She refers to Putin’s 2007 Munich Speech as laying the groundwork: “He talked about Russia’s role in policies in terms of European security and defence. In that speech, he told that Russia will return to all territories which the Soviet Union had before. European politicians didn’t believe him but from that period of time, he started very serious preparation for future invasions in different countries around Russia: Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine.”

She mentions the policy of Russification and Russian settlement of the region, the declaration of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, and the subsequent “fake referendum”, which western leaders condemned as illegitimate and illegal.

“Ordinary people didn’t support these processes but I have to be honest and tell that there were a lot of people in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, especially young people, who went to the fake referendum for independence just to see what will happen if I vote ‘Yes’. It’s really a very strange situation but even the vote paper, all the questions were without the ‘No’ [option]. All your answers were for ‘Yes. Yes, you will be independent.’ There were three questions and all of them have just ‘Yes’. If I came to vote, I agree with everything.

“In my University department there were 18 people and seven of them went to vote and said ‘Yes’. It’s really an awful story because all of them are scientists and researchers and clever, I thought, people but Russian propaganda is very strong in Donetsk and Luhansk regions.”

In Donetsk, her home was one of 36 flats in an apartment block. Her family was one of only two in the

building who didn’t go to vote. “I realised that I cannot live with people who voted against Ukraine. Of course, I understood that people believed Russia and they want to live better than now because there is a nice picture about life in Russia and not a lot of people know the reality of how life is in Russia. But I cannot live with such people. I cannot have a conversation, any connection. I cannot work with them because we are different. We have a different basis for life.”

Even if Ukraine regains its full independence, Larysa couldn’t envisage returning to Donetsk.

“We decided that we will not go back. If Ukraine moved back, we will move back with Ukraine but we will not live there. It’s not convenient for me to live with such people. It’s not my neighbour. A lot of people who were displaced from Donetsk and go there [to visit] relatives or parents said it’s absolutely another city, absolutely another people, and that it’s not the Donetsk which we knew before. It’s absolutely not. All of them have fear in their eyes and they cannot speak free and feel themselves [to be] free. They made a choice: Food or freedom.”

Кривий Ріг (Kryvyi Rih): 2014-2017

It was difficult finishing the 2014 academic year against a backdrop of growing unrest in Donetsk; government buildings being seized by masked militants, barricades, battles, and deaths. Over 6,000 people were killed in the first year of the conflict and two million people were displaced.

Larysa and her daughter were among those two million. Having managed to complete the 2014 spring term through online learning, Larysa and her colleagues went on summer holidays, to families or the seaside. They left expecting the insurgents to be defeated and to return in September for the new academic year. “Most of us go on vacation to the seaside without anything, just you, clothes for summer, your children, and that’s all. Me and my family left Donetsk on the 4th of July. We left everything there and we never came back.”

Larysa’s job, like her belongings, was left behind in Donetsk as the start of the academic year came and went. Those in charge of the University “supported the fake republic” and 12,000 students and 3,000 staff were left in limbo. Larysa and one of her colleagues held

their own referendum – an online petition among University staff: Do you want to move the University from Donetsk to another place on the territory under control of the Ukrainian government? The answer was ‘Yes’.

“A lot of people wanted to do it and three of us – three, as I say, crazy women – went to the Minister of Education and asked our Minister what we have to do. And he asked us, ‘Really, you’ll do that?’ We said, ‘Yes, we will.’ ‘Okay!’ and he signed the order for replacement of the University from Donetsk to Kryvyi Rih.”

The University had moved 400km west in theory but in practice, they had next to nothing to work with.

“We couldn’t take anything from Donetsk because the military situation made it impossible. We just built a new University under a well-known name on a new place from the beginning. We got a building for that – a small, very awful building,” Larysa says with a laugh.

“Everything we tried to do by ourselves. We tried to find the money. We tried to get access to our internet resources. We had to solve all legal procedure because we need to have registration documents. We had to get access to our financial documents. In that city where

we were moved to, there was no infrastructure for such a quantity of students and staff to live. It was impossible to find host families or host rooms or hotels or hostels. It’s a really huge, huge job from the beginning and at the beginning, we had zero. Really, zero.”

As if that multitude of problems wasn’t enough, nobody in positions of authority could give them any advice on how to proceed.

“You have to understand in that situation the country was not ready for such an invasion. Nobody could tell us what we need and have to do. State authorities or departments or ministries didn’t know what was necessary to do in that situation because part of our country just parted from the country: people, infrastructure, money, everything.

“We just tried to get any resources and we started developing a procedure for other, not only universities, for other entities which wanted to leave Donetsk and move to Ukraine. We didn’t know what we had to do but we did it, and after us, all other entities could use our experience.”

The process of moving the Donetsk National University of Economics and Trade initially took 17 days. It started in October, online



Street art on South Mall welcoming Ukrainian refugees to Cork. It reads in Ukrainian, ‘Welcome to Cork’, and in Irish, ‘Welcome to Páirc Uí Kyiv’. The work was created by artist Tom Doig and commissioned by the People’s Republic of Cork group.

education was up and running by November, and face-to-face classes followed in February. While the government permitted students to transfer to other universities, 4,000 students and 400 staff stayed with the new University. “It was really a very huge job and I, even now, don’t believe that we did that,” Larysa reflects.

She was vice-rector in international relations but because of their staff shortages, she was responsible for so much more: fundraising and IT development; financial development and infrastructure development; and their international students from China, Russia, and many African countries. She raised €8m to rebuild the University’s scientific base and kit it out with research equipment, and redeveloped their engineering faculty too.

Another difficulty was the suspicion of the local community.

“That was huge pressure for all of us because we were every day fighting for our rights, for our resources, and a lot of people told us that we are guilty for what’s happened in Ukraine because we are from Donetsk. Really that was a strange situation: When you are right because you’re a patriot and move University and save University for Ukraine but local people said that you’re from Donetsk and it means you’re not a patriot... You have to go away.

“That was a strange situation but not for long, probably half a year, and [then] the local community understood us because they saw how we can work. All of us worked 24 hours a day and seven days a week because we had to rebuild our universities, and we did that.”

Київ (Kyiv): 2017-2022

The lack of resources in Kryvyi Rih was underlined by Larysa’s living situation. She couldn’t live with her family during her work there as she simply hadn’t a place that could accommodate her and her daughter. Viktoriia, instead, went to live with Larysa’s mother for those three years.

In 2017, with the University on a stable footing, Larysa decided to apply her practical knowledge to businesses trying to stay alive in or relocate from the “grey zone”; the limbo land inhabited by those on the fringes of war but still trying to operate in peace.

She moved to Kyiv, reuniting her family and working as director of the Project Office of Vzayemodiyia-Plus (Interaction-Plus), a Ukrainian NGO which helps microbusinesses and small and medium enterprises, especially for internally displaced people. Backed by grants from the United Nations Development Programme and the United States Agency for International Development, it also supports small NGOs and the pub-

lic service to restore critical social supports and infrastructure in areas being impacted by the conflict. They have 600 members and only 16 staff but supplemented by over 100 volunteers and 20 expert advisors.

“We have a lot of small productions like homemade cheese or sweets or clothes or honey products.

“They’re really awful stories because last December, we finished more than 300 new projects for building business there, and now when I saw pictures from that territory, I saw the damage to what we did before. It’s really very hard to see,” says Larysa, her voice cracking for the first time with the weight of emotion.

“I know people who started their business before in Grozny, in Chechnya, and they came to Donetsk, and after that, they came to Mariupol, and it’s the fourth time they relocate their business. I asked my friends, ‘Are you going to start again?’, and they tell me, ‘We don’t know. We haven’t the force, we haven’t the ability, we haven’t the plan to do anything, because it’s our fourth time to relocate.’”

The NGOs they’ve helped to create are assisting refugees, civilians, children, and volunteers on the ground, while many of their microbusinesses are supporting self-employment to survive “because they need to feed their families”.

That work continues remotely to this day, advising entrepreneurs on taxation, registration, and relocation amid the ever-changing war legislation.

“It’s impossible to do any strategy or plans. For example, the day before yesterday, I spoke with our members and asked, do they need anything? And they said, ‘Yes, we need to relocate our equipment to the western part of Ukraine. Please help us to find the transport.’ ‘Okay, we’ll solve this problem.’ Yesterday, I called them and they tell me, ‘Oh, we do not need it anymore because our equipment was destroyed.’

“Just one day it took. The questions have to be decided in a couple of hours because the situation changes very quickly. We try to do what [we can to] help right now. Not tomorrow, right now, because tomorrow can be too late.”

Копк (Cork): 2022

Early on Thursday morning, February 24, Larysa was awoken by Russian bombs dropping on Boryspil International Airport, just east of Kyiv. She opened the news feed on her phone. Mere minutes had passed since Putin’s pre-6am declaration of war.

Eight days earlier, Larysa, amid increasingly aggressive Russian posturing and rhetoric, had sent

her daughter to be with her grandmother in Dnipro. “My daughter didn’t want to go to my mom alone because I did it before. I left her alone in 2014 and now she told me, ‘No, I will go with you only, and I don’t want to go at all.’ Of course, as mum, I find the right words for her, and she goes to granny alone. I stayed here and I continued work because we had a new project for consulting businesses in the Azov Sea region, including Mariupol.”

Looking at her phone on that first morning of war, she saw bombs falling in Dnipro too. Not on military infrastructure but on civil infrastructure. She decided to move

“It’s really a silly situation. War against war. There’s no explanation for that.”

After a week in Dnipro, Larysa realised she would have to flee Ukraine. “My daughter has a problem with her health because she didn’t recover after 2014. She has a huge psychological load. Now she is studying in university and a lot of her friends are in the army or volunteers and she tries to help them, to collect money, to make a picture for them, to write stories on the internet. It’s really hard for her because it’s the second time for her and the first time was not easy. We have consequences from that peri-

without a break from the freezing cold temperatures. “It was a horrible situation. It was cold, we had to sleep in the car, and I was afraid that my daughter will have the cold but everything [worked out] okay.”

They arrived at the border, crossed into Poland on March 9, and the next day, got a flight to Ireland.

“If it’s possible to say, I’m lucky because I have only one daughter and she’s not a small child. A lot of women came to the border with very small children. I saw women with four and five children from half a year to six years old. It’s really very difficult to manage all of them. They need food, they need sleep. It’s a really awful situation for them.”

Larysa delivered the first lecture of UCC’s Seán Ó Murchú Lecture Series, in memory of the former ACE director, at the end of March. It’s an emotive topic explaining to an external audience the intricacies of war in your home country and she’s keen to emphasise the cultural differences between the two nations; how Russia needs a good king to follow, while Ukrainians just need the freedom to take care of their own affairs.

When asked prior to the event what’s the one thing she wants people outside of Ukraine to understand about her country, she gives a poignant response.

“Ukraine is a very peaceful country and the Ukrainian people are different. They need their freedom much more than anything else,” she says, struggling to hold back the tears.

After a pause, she continues: “And we never will give up and most of us will sacrifice yet for the freedom of our country and we will win but the main question is: What’s the price of such victory? And the price is very high. It’s the lives of our children. It’s absolutely destroyed cities, huge cities – Kharkiv, Mariupol, Chernihiv, Sumy – these cities don’t exist. In Kharkiv lived two and half million people and now it’s impossible to see any building without damage there. It’s really impossible to understand that.

“Ukraine now needs the support of the world. We understand that there’s no real force which can stand opposite Russia and only when we are all together can we make resistance. We just need to understand and help and if we combine our efforts, I mean all countries which are interested in peace, we can stop Russia because for Ukraine alone, it will be very difficult and the price will be very high.”

Larysa encourages those who wish to donate to the Ukrainian defence and humanitarian effort to visit the National Bank of Ukraine’s website at bank.gov.ua/en.



Larysa Samosonok delivered the first lecture of UCC’s Seán Ó Murchú Lecture Series, in memory of the former ACE director, at the end of March.

from Kyiv to her family in Dnipro. The next day, beneath bombs being dropped on northern Kyiv, she was able to get a train out of the city.

“We just awaited news from the situation, how it will develop, and, of course, we understood that the power is not equal. It’s a huge, huge country with nuclear weapons and absolutely crazy leader against our country. And all the reasons why war was begun are very silly and horrible. Even now, I don’t believe that it’s true because the main reason why war was started was because Russia doesn’t want war,” Larysa says with an ironic laugh.

od of time so I decided that she has to leave Ukraine. Of course, she didn’t want to do that by herself.

“In that period of time, it was already very difficult to leave Ukraine. We spent a couple of nights in shelters under bombing because a lot of alarms were ringing and Russia is bombing all civil infrastructure, hotels, schools, kindergartens, hospitals, airports, shops.”

Their journey from Dnipro to the western border started on Friday, March 4, as they spent 72 hours driving and sleeping in the car

‘I needed the push of the redundancy to get into what I wanted to do’



Maria Keane with her sons, Yann and Arlo. Maria was used to working from home prior to COVID-19 but the pandemic changed her remote working experience entirely.

When Maria Keane came into her job interview with UCC ACE last summer, she came equipped with some quick-fire answers from her studies with ACE.

After being made redundant in October 2020, she had taken on

two July Stimulus-funded courses – part of the Government’s COVID-19 economic response package – the following spring; in Leadership and Management, and the appropriately named Managing Change and Transformation. Both

part-time, both for eight weeks.

Cut forward to her interview for a senior co-ordinator position:

“One of the questions was around, ‘What’s your experience in leadership?’, and I was able to say, well, I have experience in it and I studied these courses as well at ACE.

“Then they were saying, ‘How would you like to support learners?’, and I was able to say, well, exactly like I was supported when I did my courses at ACE. This is what the coordinator did for me, and this is what I would like to be able to do for future students.”

More than that, after over a decade working for an American international education company, managing their Irish operations, the courses were a pick-me-up for Maria after redundancy.

“What they did for me as well was when I was feeling pretty rejected after redundancy... I mean, it’s tough going when you’ve been somewhere for 10 years to be told, sorry, we’re done with you now. Even though it was a relief, it was still tough going to be able to sit down in a room and the courses I was doing were done with industry partners, so there were a lot of people from multinationals - I was the only person unemployed in the class in the two courses.

“But to be able to sit down with these people who are working for big multinationals and go, I’m just as capable as all of these people and

I’ve got a lot to bring, you know. I’ve got skills that I didn’t even realise I have, probably because I’d been somewhere for 10 years.

“They really did give me a confidence boost. They showed me that, okay, you can apply for jobs in loads of different industries. There are other options available to you.”

48 hours

Maria still wanted to stay working in education, despite her experience during COVID-19.

“When the pandemic hit, it was a disaster for international education. All of the students, we had to evacuate them out of Ireland back to the United States. We were given 48 hours by our American company to get these students out of here because all of the American universities that we worked with were going, ‘They need to come home’. But obviously, they didn’t want to go. They all had moved to Ireland and thought it was the most amazing place ever, so they’re ringing us up in tears.

“At the same time, we were trying to juggle our own experience of the whole thing, which was suddenly my kids were at home and work had gone the most crazy it had ever been.

“So we got all the students home, and then the organisation started laying people off massively. Overnight, they laid off like 60% of the workforce in the States, and they were a big enough organisation so

overnight, colleagues I’d worked with for a very long time had lost their job.

“We were like, how is this going to affect the overseas staff? So the next six months were very stressful because we were being put under pressure to come up with these new innovative ways of saving the organisation but knowing that most likely we were all going to lose our jobs. I kept going, if I don’t come up with a genius plan, they’re going to fire me.”

Maria had worked from home, in Cork City, after telling her employers, “You either need to pay me more money or I’m gonna have to move out of Dublin”. They chose the latter and Maria was able to set up an office in her parents’ house.

“Working from home was very familiar to me but the difference with the pandemic was that suddenly everyone was doing it. Whereas before for five years a phone call would suffice, suddenly everyone wanted to be on Zoom and on video calls. I was like, why does everyone want to see me when being on the phone has been sufficient for five years?

“And it just happened when suddenly my kids were at home and I was going, oh God, I’ve to try to keep them out of the room, whereas those problems never came up before.

“The other thing was when the

continued from page 19

Another step is accumulating the 550 hours of client work, 70 with supervision, required for full accreditation.

“It’s a big commitment but where it all starts is with the course because if you don’t have that, you can’t use it as the stepping stone for the next piece.”

Not that addiction counselling is the only route out of the course: “Even as a feeler to get yourself into the whole therapeutic space it’s definitely very beneficial. Even if you only wanted to do a year and get the cert out of it, there’s lots of different avenues.

“What I liked about it is you’re really supported through every part of it. You don’t necessarily have to go into addiction as such but it can be really beneficial no matter what side of things you go into.”

Mark worked in a number of roles with Tabor Group before being hired full-time and while there is always a waiting list for their addiction treatment programmes, COVID “threw petrol on the fire”.

“Addiction is a divide and conquer type of thing and isolation and COVID made that happen very quickly for people that they weren’t allowed outside the door, stay at home, people at the supermarkets buying trollies of wine, it definitely had an impact.”

On learning through COVID, Mark adds: “There was no disruption to the learning experience actually, as difficult and all as it was for them as course coordinators and how quickly Rob and Ciara had to adapt. Everyone commented on that. It was amazing the effort that had to go into that.”

That’s the biggest takeaway for Mark, that feeling of being supported through education, just as he supports those going through addiction.

“It’s been life-changing for me being given this opportunity. The skills come along the way but the constant contact and support is really... there was never anything too much.”



Mark O’Keeffe’s Diploma in Substance Misuse and Addiction Studies now hangs, framed, on the office wall in his private practice on Friar’s Walk, which he got up and running the same month as graduating.

pandemic hit, I had to move out of [my office in my parents' house] because they were cocooning.

“So I was back at home with my husband back home [too], I was in probably the most stressful work situation I’d ever been in because of the whole probably going to lose my job but at the same time trying to do whatever we could, and I’d a team in Ireland and had to lay them off one by one. It was just awful really, and a lot of them, their visas in Ireland were sponsored by the organisation so I had that guilt as well with it.”

No wonder Maria refers to her redundancy as both an ordeal and a

relief.

From the day she returned to university as a mature student at 25, Maria wanted to forge a path into adult education: “I wanted to help people to get back into education after having negative first experiences of it.

“I’d always wanted to make the move and go and work at a university but... I needed the push of the redundancy to get back into what I wanted to do.”

That job interview came about after a chat with her ACE course coordi-

nator on applying for the courses.

“I said, ‘I’d actually like to work where you work’, and she said, ‘I think they might be looking for people next summer’. I kept my eye out then for the job and it came up in UCC and I applied.”

She got the job.

She now coordinates four programmes – the Diploma in Substance Misuse and Addiction Studies, another Addiction Studies course at Cork Prison, the Postgraduate Diploma in Trauma Studies, and the Continuing Professional Development Certificate in Responding to Problem Gambling.

She also manages other projects for ACE, such as her current work on implementing a more learner-friendly way of assessing mature students applying to UCC arts programmes.

Baptism of fire

It’s not like her last job, where Maria set up the office and knew it inside out. Her first year at ACE has been about learning while doing and figuring out how along the way.

“This was starting a new job working from home, and it was a baptism of fire. It was starting in July; all of the students were coming in

August/ September time. It was like learning a new language. Acronyms are especially challenging. If you’re in an office you can say to the person, what is the DMIS or what is CACSSS?”

She has her supports, though. Five other staff members started at the same time and they still meet every Friday for an online chat to check-in with each other.

Those new staff members met their colleagues in February as ACE were able to bring the entire team together for the first time since COVID, while there was also a tour of their office in The Laurels – an environment that would take some readjustment for someone working from home so long.

Another support is UCC’s mentoring scheme, where new staff are assigned a mentor for their first year, while she’s also taken on an internal management training course.

Maria’s experience in all those courses has helped her empathise with other students learning online for the first time.

“Definitely glad I did them. Like at the time I was tearing my hair out doing assignments going, what am I doing with the kids at home? I was like, this is insane, but I got through it.

“It definitely gives me a bit of empathy for the students now who are like, I need an extension because one of my kids is this or this. I’m like, okay, fine, go for it, because I’ve been there. And I know that if the other option is that you’ve somebody that is really struggling because you’re putting them under pressure that they don’t need, then none of us want to put people in that situation.

“It’s probably made me a bit of a pushover if anything!”

Maria Keane (second from left) with other new UCC ACE staff members at an event with Paralympian Jordan Lee (right) in February. Also pictured are (front row, from left): Lyndsey El Amoud (ACE assistant director), Patrick Holloway, Joni Hendrick, Samantha Sullivan, Deirdre Daly, Eleanor McSherry, and Séamus Ó Tuama (ACE director); (back row): Riona Doolan, Maria Lotty, Alan McCarthy, Finola McCarthy, Patricia McGrath, Greg Sheehan, and Mary Aherne.



Professors, researchers, and policy-makers from adult education institutions across the globe will gather in UCC this September for the ASEM Global Lifelong Learning Week.

Hall of fame awards, research seminars, keynote speeches, and learning events all across Cork City will be held from September 26-30, linked to UCC’s hosting of the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning from 2020 to 2025.

It marks the first in-person Irish event of the ASEM Hub, which was previously hosted by Aarhus University in Denmark.

The ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub is an official network of Asian and European higher ed-

ucation institutions from over 50 countries, working and learning together to achieve excellence in lifelong learning research, reform, and innovation.

On Monday, international visitors will convene at UCC for an ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub colloquium, the first of a series of seminars that will continue daily.

ASEM partners ECOLHE (Empower Competences for Online Learning in Higher Education), an EU digital skills project, will host a workshop on Tuesday for teaching practitioners, including a masterclass by Professor Leslie Cordie of Auburn University in America. A networking dinner will take place that evening.

On Wednesday, UCC will welcome the International Adult and Con-

Global audience for Lifelong Learning Week at UCC

tinuing Education Hall of Fame to the Aula Maxima. After an afternoon lecture, the award ceremony will take place that evening for the 2021 and 2022 inductees.

AONTAS CEO Niamh O’Reilly will become just the second Irish person to be inducted into the Hall of Fame as part of the class of 2021, alongside Francesc Garcia (Venezuela/ Barcelona), Licínio Lima (Portugal), Michael Osborne (Scotland), and others who have yet to be announced.

Thursday is Cork UNESCO Learning Cities Day, with events taking

place across Cork City hosted by local education partners.

There will also be an ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub mid-term review meeting, with all six of the Hub’s research networks sharing updates on their work.

That evening Arne Carlsen, former UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning director and founding chair of the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub, will deliver the annual Alfred O’Rahilly Lecture at the Aula Maxima.

That will be followed by the pre-

sentation of the Bertram Windle Award to Maria Slowey, Ireland’s other International Hall of Fame member, recognising her outstanding achievements in lifelong learning and adult education. Previous award winners include Eamonn Ó Carragáin, the GLLiC (Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork) committee, Cork Adult Education Council, Dick Langford, and Áine Hyland.

The ASEM Global Lifelong Learning Week will conclude on Friday, September 30, followed by a civic reception hosted by the Lord Mayor at City Hall.

Coaching course a game-changer in all aspects of life

Paula Fitzpatrick was a leader on the rugby pitch and now she's a leader in the off-field efforts to support female athletes.

In her playing career, Paula captained her country, was top try-scorer for Ireland in both the 2015 Six Nations victory and at the 2017 Rugby World Cup, and was on the first Irish international team to beat New Zealand and reach the World Cup semi-finals in 2014. She stepped away quietly from international rugby in 2018 after 41 Ireland appearances.

In her sports science research, Paula has studied the effect of ice baths on recovery, the influence of supplements on sprinting performance, the impact of sleep deprivation on cyclists, and the weight loss patterns of horse racing jockeys.

But the greatest surprise in all her studies, one which is she is now trying to address in her role as sport science research director and lecturer at IT Carlow, was how much remains unknown about female athletes.

"Only 6% of published research has only female participants," says Paula. "Obviously, the majority of it is male-only participants as opposed to mixed so to think that there's so little information out there and the majority of female athlete guidelines, in terms of nutrition and training, strength and conditioning, the majority of what we tell our female athletes is just taken from male studies and moulded to say, 'Well, we assume this will be the same for you but we don't actually know that.'"

Paula is a leader of the FAS-Tr (female athlete science translated) research group which aims to bridge that knowledge gap.

"We've a lot of great research coming out now on the effect of the menstrual cycle and the effect of even oral contraceptives on female athletes. A lot more studies are looking at the female element, which is really great to see because now we're going to have specific guidelines and individualised approaches for female athletes."

She has spoken about the parallels that can be drawn

between rugby and research in attitudes to adversity and lessons in resilience. She wants to pass on those lessons to her students to foster resilience in the face of the failures, doubts, and dilemmas that inevitably arise throughout the research process.

Part of that leadership role saw Paula take up the Postgraduate Diploma in Personal Management and Coaching through UCC ACE. The course appealed not just to her work as a research leader but also to her team sports background – the psychology, the goal-setting, how to achieve your potential and help others reach theirs.

The prospect of a winter lockdown and the Government's COVID stimulus package made the decision to sign up easy.

"It seemed like a good thing to spend energy on and [I was] just really interested in that whole aspect of how people react to different situations in organisations, the element of change management, and then very much interested in the leadership aspect as well.

"If you're trying to do something new or change something within an organisation, what's the best way to go about that? How do you get people to want to be on board?"

The course is endlessly transferrable. Business and HR? Lots of applications. Health and social care? Sure. Education and training? Of course! Management? You bet! Personal coaching, career coaching, and sports coaching? Yes, yes, and yes again.

Eye-opening

Paula picks out modules in cognitive behavioural coaching, and team coaching and leadership as being of particular interest in equipping sportspeople with the tools and techniques to fit their high-achieving mindset.

She has experienced a variety of leadership styles and personalities in team environments. She recalls a team assessment with Ireland a few years prior to taking on the course, which she could draw on in lectures.



Picture: Matt Browne, Sportsfile

"That really opened my eyes. It's not dictating what your personality is but it gives you an idea of where your blind spots are and where your strengths are. We did it as a team and we all were made aware of everyone else's personality types and preferences. Because of that, we also were alerted to the best ways to treat different types of personalities.

"It was very similar in the course with UCC. You're learning about how people respond differently to different situations or different environments and how, if you know how to speak to somebody in a way that they understand and that they value, you can change the environment or change the situation to change somebody's response to it and make it a more effective response."

She says the UCC course was also "eye-opening" in assessing people's values and understanding how people assess their own values. It wasn't just theoretical. They practiced coaching in online breakout rooms, taking turns in groups of three: coaching a classmate, being coached by another classmate, and observing the other two classmates coaching

and being coached.

"All three of those scenarios were really beneficial in terms of learning about yourself as a coach. You were learning about your own values and your own approaches to different situations, your own methods of goal-setting, and your attitudes and behaviours, and what they're influenced by.

"When we were coaching, we were bringing up coaching scenarios so people would come up with personal issues, work-related issues, some issues would be family-based. It was very interesting to encounter all of these different goals and to try and help somebody work through... This whole idea of you're holding the space for somebody to come to their own conclusions and to make their own choices.

"It's really an interesting environment to be in that somebody is willing to share some pretty personal information with you. There's the trust there that you'll treat that with respect."

There were 50 hours of practical, pro bono coaching work logged by each participant as part of the course.

Paula did a couple of team sessions for that, a whole other dynamic from one-on-one coaching.

"With team coaching, you're dealing with a room of 20 or 30 people, managing that, and trying to get that group, all from different backgrounds, to come together for a collective goal. It's quite interesting to see how that comes together and to find common ground between people and to see how different people within a team react in different scenarios.

"The beauty of being in team sport is that you've so many different types of people and people that you would never meet otherwise so to get all those people to come together and be on the same page is a really interesting thing. The coaching course has been very useful in that respect."

She learned about psychological safety, one of the most important factors for effective team culture, and then there are the work applications... It guides her in encouraging her postgraduate students to take the lead on research decisions and it helps her identify collabora-

tions with colleagues.

In truth, it applies to all aspects of life.

"What you learn on the course, it's not something that you just apply to one aspect of your life," says Paula. "It really permeates through everything that you do because it's how you approach people, and there are people everywhere. Whether it's in your personal life, whether it's work-related, or whether it's sports-related, there are definitely applications and thought processes and approaches that you'd use from it.

"As well as that, though, the course is really enjoyable. Maybe not the assignments," she says with a laugh, "which were normally last-minute but the facilitators were really well informed and made you think.

"Pat [O'Leary, programme co-ordinator] was great as a facilitator and the rest of the group really got a lot out of each other. Everybody was so supportive and you really felt like people connected and built bonds through it."