

# LINC Programme: Enabling Leadership for Inclusion through an Innovative Competency-Based Blended Adult Continuing Professional Learning Programme

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## Abstract

*In 2015, an Interdepartmental Group (IDG) examining mechanisms to support access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme for children with disabilities recommended the creation of a role of Inclusion Coordinator in early years' settings. LINC, an innovative competency-based adult continuing professional learning programme, is a Level 6 Special Purpose Award<sup>1</sup> designed to enhance the inclusion of children with additional needs in early years' settings with graduates becoming Inclusion Coordinators. This paper provides a background and overview of the LINC Programme, examines the adult learning methodology employed and outlines the tools adopted for measuring its success.*

**Keywords:** Inclusion, Early Years' Education, Childcare, Access, LINC, Continuing Professional Learning, Additional Needs, Special Needs, Disability, Higher Education, Further Education, Adult Education, Blended Learning, Online, Education Methodology, Impact, Evaluation

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1 The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a system of ten levels used to describe the Irish qualifications system including qualifications achieved in school, further education and higher education. The relationship between the Irish NFQ and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF – EHEA) has been formally established. See <http://www.nfq-qqi.com/> for further information.

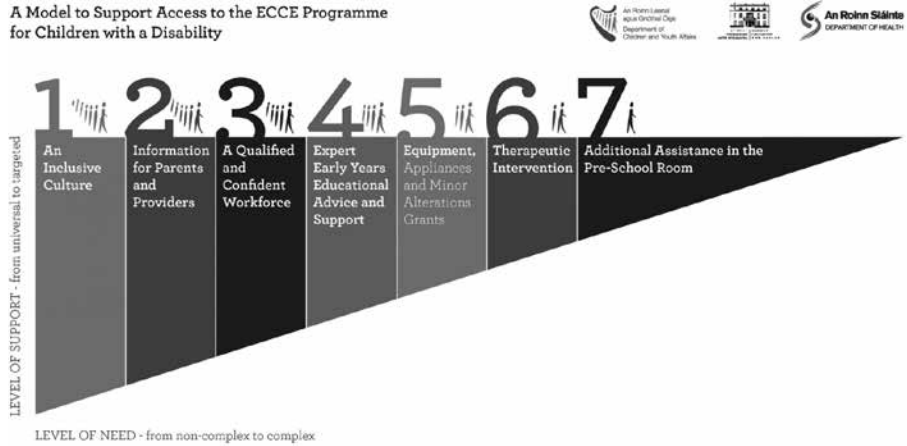
## **Introduction**

The benefits of high quality inclusive education for children in the early years are well-documented (Ring *et al.*, 2016; Ring and O’Sullivan, 2018). However, providing for an effective inclusive education system is a complex political, economic and social struggle, involving reform at governmental, societal, pre-school and school levels. While the Irish Government has invested significantly in fostering inclusive school systems at primary and post-primary levels, investment at pre-school level has been neglected until very recently (Ring, 2016). This has had negative consequences for young children with additional needs and their families in terms of access to an appropriate educational experience right from the start (Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). It has also amplified the status-gap between early childhood and primary /post-primary teachers, with the latter enjoying significantly higher professional status and related pay and working conditions. In order to begin to address these emerging dissonances, the Irish Government launched the seven level *Access and Inclusion Model* (AIM) in November 2015, to provide for a new model of government-funded supports aimed at supporting the inclusion of children with additional needs at pre-school level (Inter-Departmental Group (IDG), 2015). This article reports on an innovative competency-based blended leadership adult continuing professional learning (CPL) programme developed to address level three of the AIM and discusses some of the initial programme evaluation findings.

## **Background – LINC Programme Overview**

Embedded in international research, the seven-level AIM detailed in Figure 1. adopts a child-centred approach and acknowledges the centrality of developing a co-ordinated, responsive, effective and sufficiently resourced inclusive education system for children in early childhood care and education settings (ECCE). The model was developed following extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including the parents of children with additional needs. In accordance with best practice, the model focuses on identifying and responding to each individual child’s developmental level, abilities and needs rather than relying exclusively on formal diagnoses.

Figure 1. AIM Model (IDG, 2015, p. 6)



The Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme, located at Level three of the AIM, acknowledges the critical role of continuing professional learning (CPL) in cultivating and leading inclusion. The *Competency Framework for Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education* (LINC Consortium 2016b) in Table 1 below, underpins the programme and was developed through identifying the knowledge, practices and values specific to leading inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in the early years (LINC Consortium, 2016b; Urban, Robson and Scacchi, 2017; Pilgrim *et al.*, 2017; Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018).

**Table 1. Competency Framework Underpinning the LINC Programme (LINC Consortium, 2016b)**

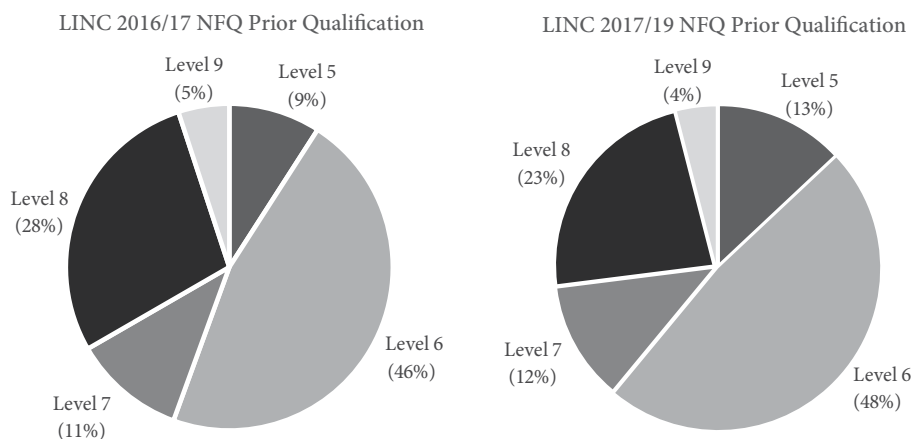
<b>A. An Inclusive Culture</b>	
1	All children are welcome.
2	All children are valued.
3	A focus is placed on promoting respectful interaction.
4	There are high expectations for all children.
5	Partnership with parents/carers is actively promoted.
6	Difference is acknowledged.
7	The environment accommodates the needs of all children.
8	All policies are inclusive policies.
<b>B. Inclusive Practice</b>	
1	Transitioning to and from the setting is a positive experience for children, families, and staff.
2	Support for children with additional needs is co-ordinated.
3	Staff members are encouraged to avail of continuing professional development opportunities.
4	All staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the promotion of inclusive practice.
5	The expertise of staff is acknowledged and utilised.
<b>C. An Inclusive Pedagogy</b>	
1	Children's experiences are planned with the needs of all children in mind.
2	Strategies are in place to promote the participation of all children in learning.
3	A range of appropriate pedagogical approaches is used to support the holistic development of all children.
4	Play and playful learning are key features of practice for all children.
5	All children's communication and interaction are promoted.
6	All children's views are valued and responded to.
7	Early identification of children who require additional support is central to practice.
8	A variety of approaches to observation, recording and assessment is in place.
9	Early years educators plan, implement, and evaluate children's learning in partnership with children, parents/carers and relevant others.
10	Positive relationships are understood and nurtured.
11	Children's specific assessed needs are understood as 'signposts' that support children's learning and development.
12	External assistance is elicited where required to support the setting in meeting children's additional needs.

The first cohort of adult learners commenced the LINC programme in September 2016, following a competitive tender won by a consortium led by Mary Immaculate College (MIC), and including Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and Maynooth University (MU) – Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education (MIC, 2016). To date, almost 1800 adult learners have participated in the programme.

### A Diverse Cohort

As the learners on the LINC Programme are nominated by early years’ setting (employers), all of the learners continue to work with their setting while undertaking the programme. The Irish regulatory requirement for early years’ settings requires that early years’ educators have a qualification that meets certain minimum requirements and a list of such recognised qualifications is published and maintained by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (DCYA, 2018). Recognised early years’ qualifications range from Level 5 to Level 10 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (NFQ, 2018). As a result, both the first and second LINC cohorts have included learners with a wide range of educational qualifications and backgrounds from Level 5 up Level 9 graduate diplomas and Masters degrees, which suggests substantial diversity in terms of learners’ prior education experience and qualifications (see Figure 2 below).

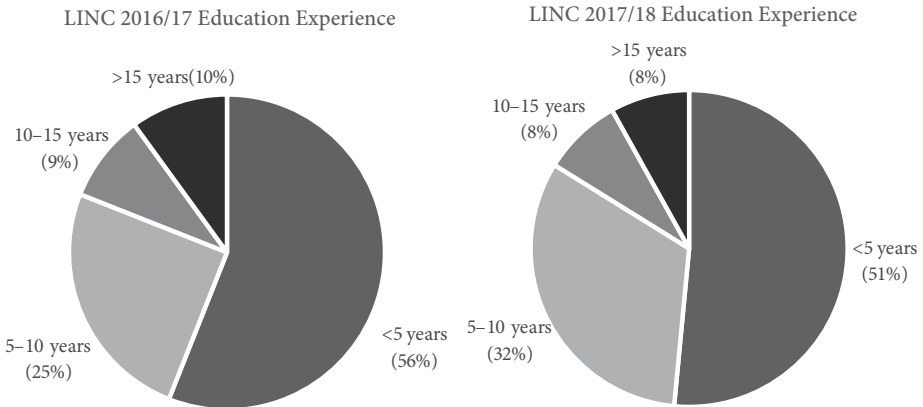
**Figure 2. Prior Qualifications of LINC Learners (LINC Consortium, 2018)**



While learners’ qualifications are diverse, it is also significant that many learners had not engaged in formal education in some time with 10% (2016/17) and 8%

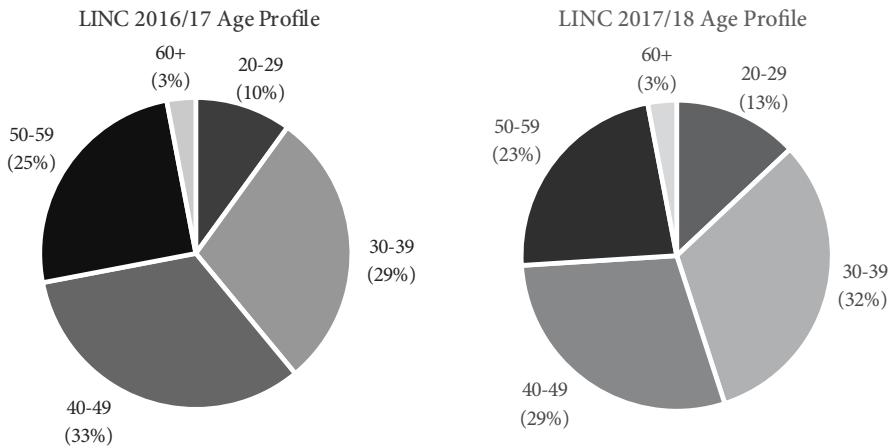
(2017/18) not having been engaged in formal education programmes in over 15 years prior to commencing the LINC Programme. Figure 3 below, details the educational experience of the first two cohorts, and demonstrates that more than 50% (56% - 2016/17 and 51% - 2017/18) had engaged in formal learning in the five years immediately prior to them commencing the LINC Programme.

**Figure 3. Time Since Last Education Experience for LINC Learners (LINC Consortium, 2018)**



The age profile of the cohorts is also varied and, as detailed in Figure 4 below, includes learners from their early 20s to their mid-to late 60s.

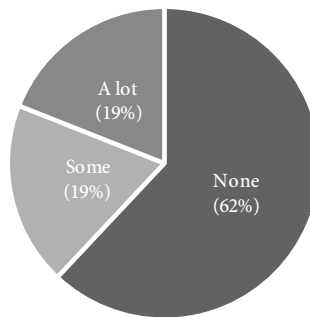
**Figure 4. Age Profile of LINC Learners (LINC Consortium, 2018)**



Prior to commencing the programme, learners were asked to identify how much interaction they had previously with online learning. Figure 5 below, highlights that 62% of learners had never engaged previously with online learning, while 38% had, with 19% having completed some (defined as being ‘a module or more’) and 19% having completed ‘a lot’ (defined as being ‘a full programme’).

**Figure 5. LINC Learners' Experience of Online Learning (LINC Consortium, 2018)**

LINC 2016/17 Experience with Online Learning



The diverse profile of the learners therefore necessitated an approach to CPL that optimises learners’ engagement while simultaneously acknowledging, celebrating and accommodating this diversity.

### **Adult Education Methodology**

The traditional face of education has seen a transformation of sorts in recent years and now encompasses an increasingly electronic world (Williams, 2002). There is now a requirement to embed technology-based practices in education and to reach a more diverse cross-section of the population (Hicks, Reid and George, 2001). This integration of online learning along with face-to-face learning experiences can be referred to as blended learning (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

Some have suggested that this blended learning approach may in fact be even more efficient and effective than the traditional classroom model. Benefits of this approach include its flexible nature for learners (Cheung and Hew, 2011) and the potential to accommodate large numbers of learners (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Learners also have the opportunity to learn from home and have some control over ‘time, place, path and/or pace’ (Horn and Staker, 2011,

p. 3). Studies further indicate that faculty members, who employ a blended-learning approach to course design, report improved outcomes from their learners related to, *interalia*, the quality of written assignments, depth of engagement with course content and overall success rates (Garnham and Kaleta 2002; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2015).

Although technology plays a vital role in facilitating the LINC programme, technology was considered a means to a pedagogical end with instructional designers and content developers utilising pedagogical expertise to enhance learning through the *meaningful* use of technology (McGee and Reis, 2012, p.15). Key principles of instructional and universal design were combined with established learning theories to promote an active online learning environment (Gagné, Briggs and Wager, 1992; National Disability Authority (NDA), 2014).

A variety of methods was developed to ensure that the LINC programme was accessible to learners with a range of learning styles and experiences. Each of the six modules comprises one face-to-face day (approx. six hours) along with six weekly online ‘units’ of both synchronous and asynchronous learning materials. In order to ensure as much flexibility as possible for the 900+ adult learners annually, the majority of the programme employs asynchronous online learning, ensuring lessons and learning activities can be completed at a time that is convenient for the learner. Each week, the asynchronous material includes three pre-recorded lessons and between one and three learning activities. The online lessons are a mix of voice-recorded over content interleaved with specific activities, for instance, viewing of video-clips, reading articles or webpages and reflections. In addition to these, there are requirements to contribute to specific learning activities including online discussion fora with other learners, mini-quizzes, uploading reflections and practice-related assignments. The synchronous element of the programme requires learners to engage in a weekly online tutorial, in groups of 20-25, and complete a text-based tutorial with their tutor over a 30-minute timeframe. Taking into account the Irish broadband situation, whereby one in ten internet users highlighted speed as being an issue when completing online purchases (Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2017), video and voice-based tutorials would not have been possible for all learners, given the bandwidth requirements, and may have caused issues for this synchronous learning activity. Therefore, a text-based tutorial system was used, and has functioned well in ensuring effective communication amongst learners themselves and with their tutors. These tutorials were designed to promote communities of practice (Anderson, 2008), to ensure that key learning



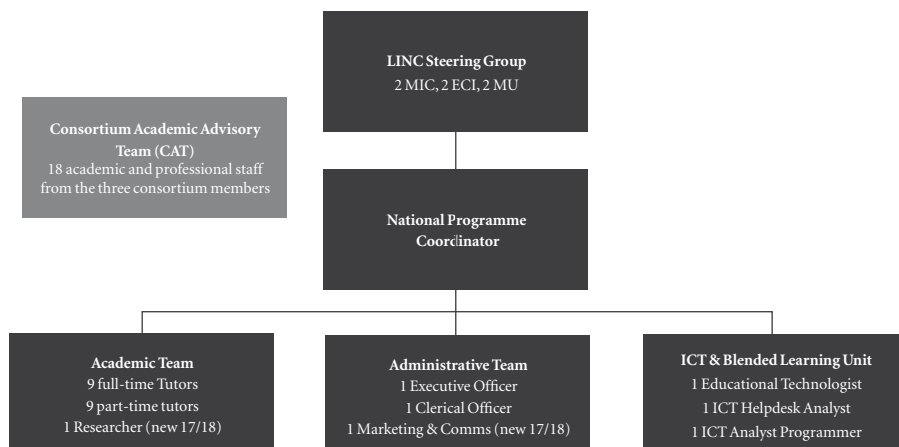
points were understood and to provide learners with an opportunity to engage in discussion, question and seek clarification.

Finally, a key element of the LINC Programme is the mentoring session which creates a forum for learners to meet with their tutor on a one-to-one basis and reflect on their practice. The session is conducted with reference to *The Competency Framework for Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education* (LINC Consortium 2016b referred to in Table 1 previously), which is used by the learner and tutor to develop an action plan for the learner in order to assist with the implementation of the theory into practice. This process comprises a core part of the final module, the Portfolio module, where the learner has the opportunity to demonstrate inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy.

### A Supportive Team

The LINC Programme is supported by a large team, responsible for the delivery of the programme. The Steering Group, comprising representatives from each of the Consortium Members (MIC, ECI and MU-Froebel) is responsible for the overall governance, strategy and direction of the programme. A Consortium Academic Advisory Team (CAT), with combined expertise in ECCE, inclusive and special education, as well as leadership and management is involved in programme development. Operationally, a team of academic and professional services staff, managed by the National Programme Coordinator (NPC) has responsibility for the programme roll out. Figure 6 below, provides an overview of the 50 people involved in in the rollout of this programme.

**Figure 6. LINC Programme Governance, Management and Operational Team (LINC Consortium, 2018)**



Specific attention has been directed to supporting the diverse learning cohort through Learner Support Services; Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Support; Educational Technology Support and Academic Support.

#### *Learner Support Services*

A dedicated support team has been recruited to manage queries from members of the public, prospective learners, employers and learners. This team assists and guides prospective and current learners through processes such as application, enrolment, examinations, bursary payments and graduation. This 'one-stop-shop' is a dedicated support for LINC learners, and enhances access by learners to other support areas where necessary. This also precludes the needs for these learners, who are not based on the MIC campus, to access all services in one place.

#### *ICT Support*

Given the blended-learning element, and the profile of the learners, their prior ICT and educational experience, as well as the fact that they are working, the provision of ICT Support was deemed to be critical. As a result, the LINC Programme has funded a dedicated ICT Support Technician, as well as an ICT Administrator. These posts allow for the existing ICT Helpdesk hours to be extended (from 5pm up to 7pm nightly and on Saturday) to facilitate LINC Learners as well as provision of timely server and network administration and support.

#### *Educational Technology Support*

A dedicated Educational Technologist role, located within MIC's Blended Learning Unit (BLU), has facilitated the design of the relevant module pages on Moodle, the design of the module templates, and the implementation of a thorough content review process prior to modules being made available for learners. This quality assurance mechanism ensures that the material presented is accurate, relevant and presented in a suitable format for an online learning approach.

#### *Academic Support*

A team of tutors, each leading one of the centres, is responsible for working with approximately 100 learners. The tutor delivers the face-to-face content (twice in order to facilitate smaller group sizes); facilitates the weekly tutorial session; moderates the online discussion; assists learners with queries and completes the

mentoring session with the learners. It should be noted that strict criteria are used to recruit this team of tutors, including an academic qualification (degree-level) in ECCE, experience working in the early years' sector, an adult education qualification and experience in the adult and further education sector. Assistant tutors support the delivery of the face-to-face classroom sessions, reducing the ratio (approx. 1:25) further to facilitate effective group work.

### Measuring Success

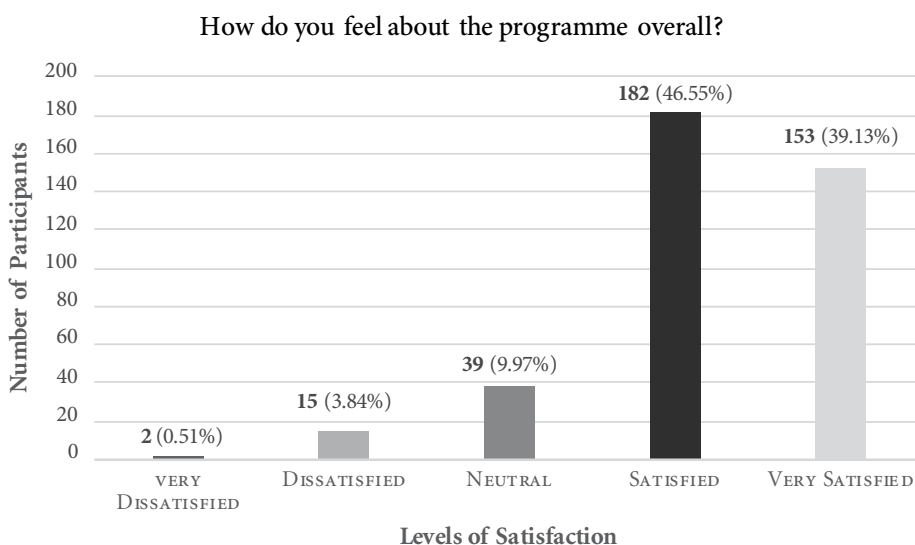
A multi-method methodological programme evaluation framework has been designed and is summarised in Table 2 below. This contemporaneous evaluation is designed to ensure that the views of all stakeholders are harnessed and the voices of children, parents, families and practitioners are captured, as advocated in *Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009; Ring, 2018).

**Table 2. Summary of the Multi-Method Methodological LINC Programme Evaluation (LINC Consortium 2016a)**

Strand	Research Technique	Summary	Time-Frame
Strand 1	Literature Review	Focuses on the development of inclusion; key elements of inclusive practice; teacher competency for inclusion and utilising innovative technologies for teacher education.	2016-2020
Strand 2	Survey of participant evaluation of each individual module	On-line survey	2016-2020
Strand 3	Annual participant and employer evaluation of the programme linked to the competency focus of the programme	On-line survey	2017-2020
Strand 4	Stakeholder Consultations	Semi-Structured interviews	2019-2020
Strand 5	Individual interviews with Tutors	Semi-Structured interviews	2019-2020
Strand 6	An analysis of programme materials, documentation and assessment data	Documentary Analysis	2017-2020
Strand 7	An analysis of quality control visits to face-to-face deliver sessions	Documentary Analysis	2016-2020
Strand 8	Compilation of final report		2020

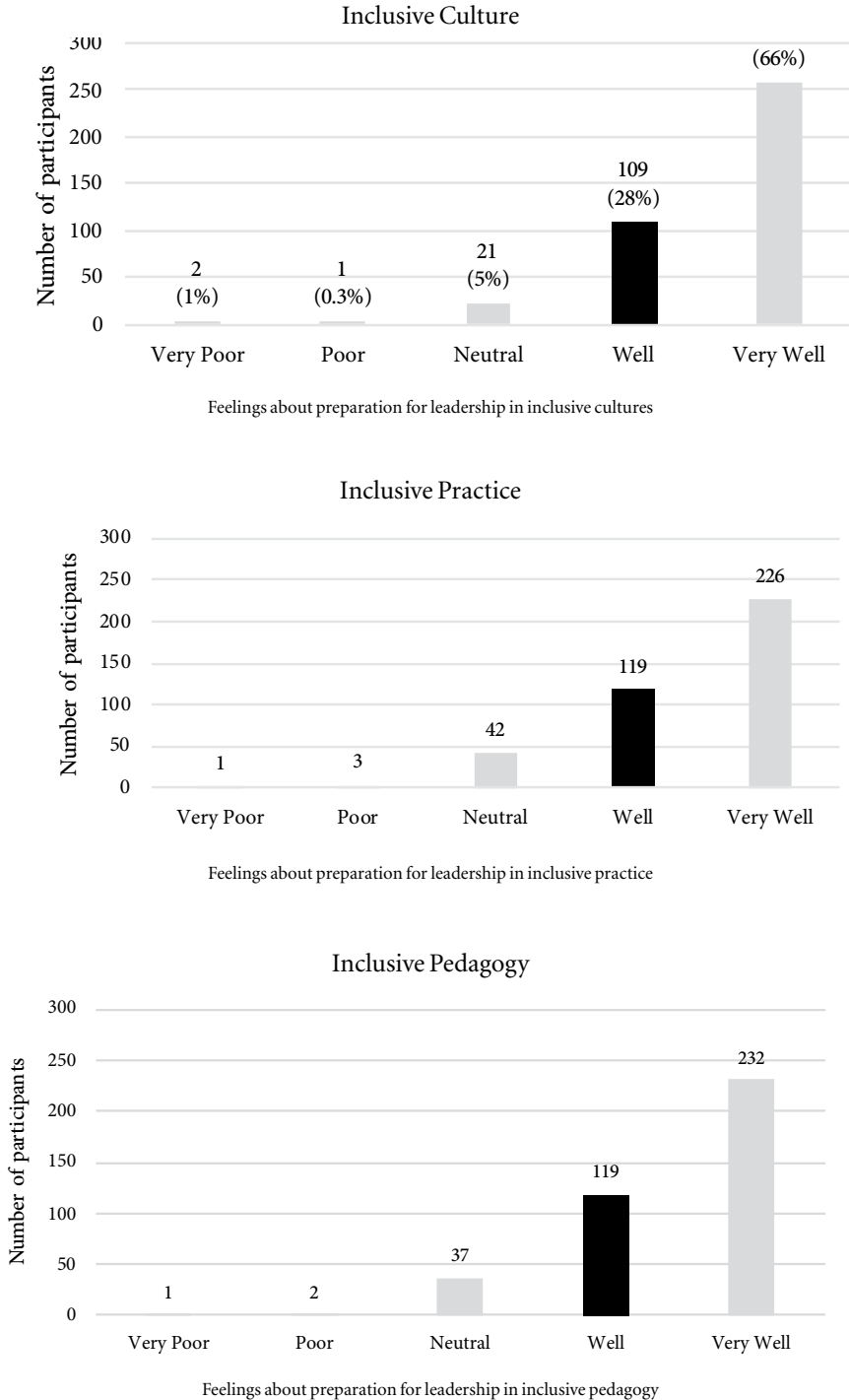
Strands two and three have now been completed for the first cohort (2016/17). Participants had the opportunity to anonymously answer evaluative surveys based on each individual module, as well as the overall programme, while employers were also offered the opportunity to provide anonymous feedback through the employer’s evaluation. In particular, strand three generated a large number of responses (n=391, or 46% of learners). The key outcome of this evaluation is an 86% satisfaction rating for the programme overall (see Figure 7 below).

**Figure 7. LINC Evaluation: Overall Satisfaction (LINC Consortium, 2018)**



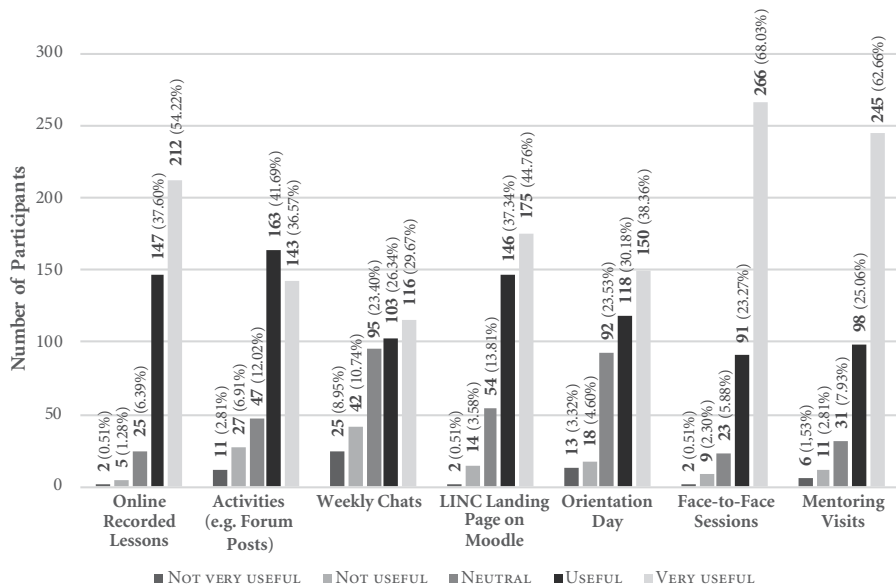
In relation to the *Competency Framework for Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education* (LINC Consortium 2016b, 94% of learners believed the programme prepared them to lead an inclusive culture effectively, while 88% and 89% responded positively on how well they were prepared to lead inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy (see Figure 8, below).

**Figure 8. LINC Evaluation: Preparing to Lead (LINC Consortium, 2018)**



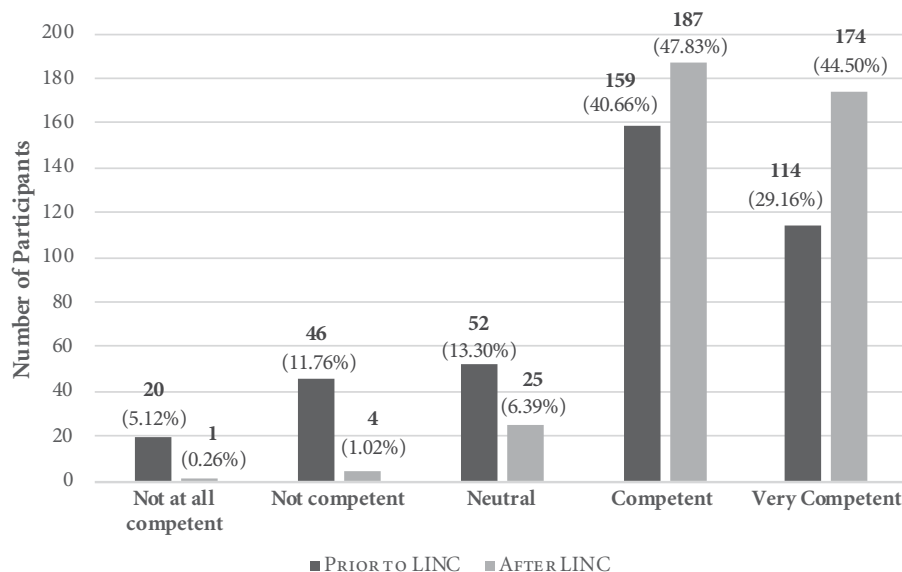
Learners were asked to rate how useful to them each of the programme activities were in terms of their learning and in terms of the transfer of learning into practice. Figure 9 below, demonstrates participants' satisfaction with each of the learning activities. As can be seen, the online recorded lessons (92%) and face-to-face classroom sessions (91%) rated highest, with the mentoring visit (88%) also rated highly useful in terms of the learning process. The weekly chats (later renamed online tutorials) were rated at 66% useful, and orientation day at 69% useful – both of these elements were re-designed ahead of the rollout for 2017/18.

**Figure 9. Usefulness of Programme Aspects (LINC Consortium, 2018)**



Finally, as outlined above, more than 60% of the learners had not had any experience of online learning prior to taking part in the LINC Programme. Learners were asked to rate their own competence in relation to using Technology for Educational Purposes both before and after the programme. Prior to undertaking the programme, 70% of learners rated themselves as being competent or very competent, with this raising to over 92% after the programme. 17% of learners rated themselves as not being competent prior to undertaking LINC, and this reduced to 1% following their completion of the programme. Learners were not asked if they intended to pursue any further education after completing the LINC programme, however, this question has now been added to the overall programme evaluation survey for 2017/2018.

**Figure 10. Competence in Using Technology for Educational Purposes (LINC Consortium, 2018)**



The LINC Programme was shortlisted and won the ‘Best Online Learning Experience’ Award at the Education Awards 2017, was shortlisted for an AONTAS STAR Award in 2018 and has also been shortlisted for an Education Award 2018.

### **Conclusion**

Emerging findings from the evaluation of the LINC programme suggest that the development of a competency-based blended adult learning programme, which considers participants’ prior learning, accommodates a variety of learning styles, provides a range of targeted supports and is based on best practice in instructional design, has the potential to transform the experience of CPL for adult learners. The academic excellence underpinning the programme, the differentiated pedagogical strategies and the experiential practice-based focus have clearly contributed to optimising engagement for a wide variety of adult learners in a multi-media environment. Critically the evaluation findings suggest that the programme has impacted considerably on enabling leadership for inclusion and has the potential to transform both the lives of adult learners and those of children, families and society in Ireland.

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