

# Community Education for Human Rights and Social Inclusion: An Cosán's Right to Work Education Project

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores the nature of successful human rights education through the lens of a single case study. In the context of new legislation governing the right to work, An Cosán's Right to Work Education Project partnered with more than forty International Protection Applicants (IPAs) living in Direct Provision centres across Ireland. Funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the programme sought to address participants' human rights and social inclusion alongside their employment and self-employment opportunities. The programme was delivered over 9 days of workshops. Using adult community education methods, practitioners facilitated participatory learning spaces where IPAs and other stakeholders involved in human rights and social inclusion could explore legislation, practice, and experience together. Blended learning options were offered to those participants unable to attend in person. The article draws on participant voices and practitioner reporting to outline the project's short-term impact. Concentrating on human rights education, it analyses what worked and why. Finally, recommendations are made in relation to promoting human rights education 'from below' in adult community education spaces.*

**Keywords:** Adult Community Education, Human Rights, Social Inclusion, Right to Work, Blended Learning, Refugee, Asylum Seeker, International Protection Applicant

## **Introduction**

An Cosán (Irish: 'The Path') is a community organisation offering people of all ages diverse programmes in early years education and care, parenting, community, further and higher education. For over thirty-five years, the organisation has sought to use the power of transformative education to end the

injustice of poverty. In recent years, An Cosán has also moved online to bring its adult community education ethos beyond its home in Jobstown, Tallaght to communities across Ireland. An Cosán's student body consists of those most marginalised in our society: socio-economically disadvantaged students, lone parents, and students with asylum seeker status, often living in Direct Provision (DP) centres (Kovacic et al., 2020). The following paper examines a single case study of An Cosán's work, the Right to Work Education Project, to explore the nature of successful human rights education.<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, An Cosán partnered with more than forty International Protection Applicants (IPAs) living in DP centres across Ireland. The Right to Work Education Project aimed to co-create a blended learning programme addressing participants' human rights and social inclusion concerns alongside their employment and self-employment opportunities. This article draws on participant voices and practitioner reporting to outline the project's short-term impact and to analyse what worked regarding human rights education. It highlights the role of holistic, wraparound learner supports and an inclusive programme learning environment. The article further suggests that successful human rights education requires adult community education methods, specifically modelling a dialogic, solidaristic approach to learning and project decision-making. Documenting this experience is intended to facilitate deeper reflection and dialogue among practitioners on the nature of successful educative practice for human rights and social inclusion today.

### **Listening to the Voices: Project Origins and Pre-Delivery**

The Right to Work Education Project originated in An Cosán's staff listening to IPAs within our student body and network of collaborative partner organisations across Ireland. This network included affected-led, civil society groups such as the Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland (MASI). During 2017 and 2018, An Cosán delivered several blended learning programmes in community development to learners in DP centres in Galway, Monaghan, Kerry, and Dublin. Meanwhile, in February 2018, after an asylum seeker initiated a legal challenge, the Supreme Court declared the ban on work for asylum seekers unconstitutional. The new legal framework, introduced to satisfy the EU Refugee Reception Directive, recognised asylum

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seekers' right to work while retaining restrictions on full and instant access to the labour market. Beyond legal restrictions, the institutionalisation of asylum seekers in DP creates a career gap for people seeking employment after receiving their status as a refugee (Buczowska, 2018, pp.39-40). Furthermore, long periods of inactivity undermine people's well-being and mental health, damaging their self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as confidence in their own abilities (MASI, 2019).

In these circumstances, IPAs' access to relevant education, training, work experience, and networking opportunities is important. Cognisant of this context, An Cosán developed the Right to Work Education Project in response to learners' and community partners' expressed hopes and concerns. We sought to partner with IPAs currently living in DP and to co-create the programme. Informed by adult community education principles, this approach centred a dialogic, solidaristic approach to learning and project decision-making. The proposed programme aimed to address participants' collective human rights and social inclusion issues alongside their individual plans to pursue employment and self-employment opportunities. An Cosán applied to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission under its 2018 Human Rights and Equality Grant Scheme. The Right to Work Education Project received 20,000 euro in funding. The funding determined the project's scope and timeframe; all work packages and reports were due for completion by November 2019.

The Right to Work Education Project occurred over three phases in 2019. The initial pre-delivery phase (January to April) centred on stakeholder consultation and participant recruitment. As project lead, I held exploratory meetings with IPAs, including current students at An Cosán, and potential collaborative partners. These included affected-led civil society organizations, notably MASI and the active 'Right to Work' civil society campaign. The delivery team held further meetings with NGO stakeholders with relevant expertise, notably the Irish Refugee Council and the European Network Against Racism, as well as with business representatives that expressed an interest in supporting the project, including Business in the Community, Accenture, and LinkedIn. In keeping with a co-agency approach to learning and decision-making, applicants were asked to complete an online questionnaire before joining. Respondents had an opportunity to outline their reasons for taking part, their future career plans, as well as their study interests and preferred choices of workshop topic.

IPAs seeking to join the programme expressed a diverse range of hopes, capacities, needs, and concerns. Many articulated a desire to learn more about their rights:

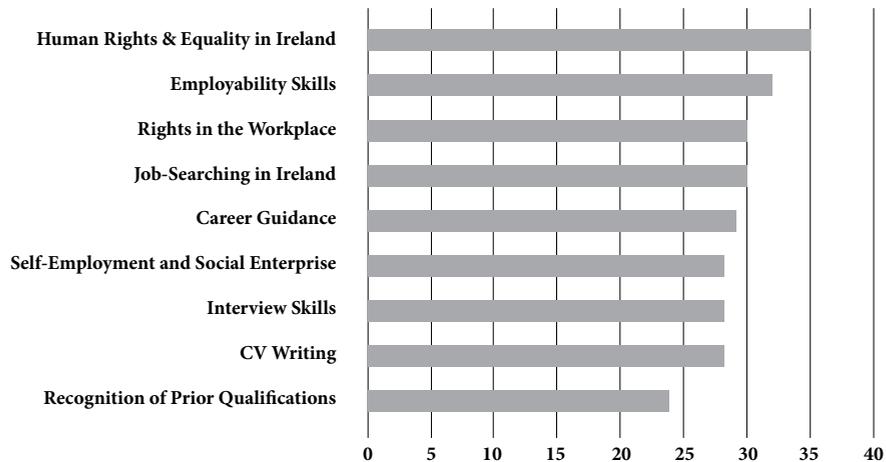
I would like to learn more about right to work in Ireland and Irish society. I am very interested to humanity issues and challenges in Ireland (Respondent A).

I want to know all about my rights in Ireland and the things that I am able to do as a refugee (Respondent B).

To learn more about working rights (Respondent C).

Participants collectively and consistently expressed their shared concern to be treated fairly and offered the same opportunities as a white, Irish person when seeking employment. This latter point is further evidenced in *Table 1* by the high priority given to themes such as ‘human rights and equality in Ireland’ (chosen by 80% of respondents) and ‘rights in the workplace’ (68%).

**Participants’ Expressed Workshop Interests**



*Table 1. Responses to the question ‘Which of the following workshop topics might interest you?’ (Please tick as many of the following as you wish). Total of 44 responses received.*

Would-be participants further expressed interest in developing applied knowledge and skills needed to source and secure work:

I want to increase my personal skills. I would like to find a job (Respondent B).

To improve my employability skills (Respondent C).

How to search [for] a job in Ireland and having the knowledge of rights in the workplace will be of great help to me as I am in the process of seeking a job (Respondent D).

I want to enhance my skills and improve my employability capacity (Respondent E).

I would like to learn more about caring [for] elder people (Respondent F).

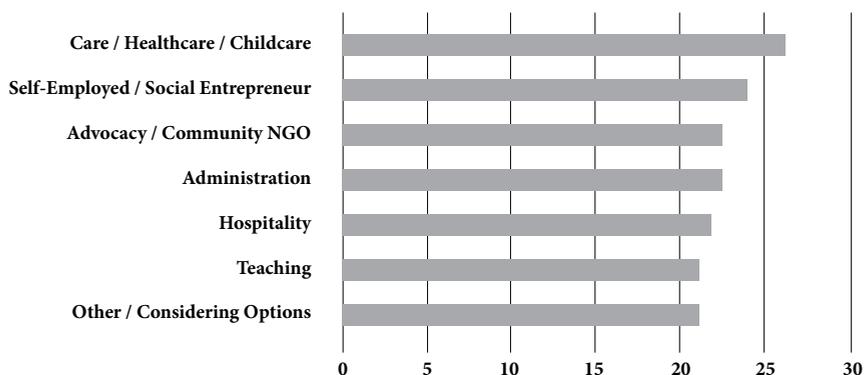
A smaller number of respondents sought to learn more about self-employment:

I must learn about starting a business in Ireland (Respondent G).

I want to start something on my own, either in a full-time employment or doing my own business (Respondent H).

The survey data further highlights how participants held a wide variety of educational qualifications, work experiences, and expectations concerning future employment. This diversity was reflected in participants' choice of future career path (*Table 2*).

## Career Interests



*Table 2. Participants' Career Interests*

Among the other motivations for taking part provided by applicants, some wanted to pursue personal development and to achieve greater independence:

The programme itself is mature for adult like me who has a past. I have so much passion for anything that pertains education (Respondent I).

I am interested in self-development (Respondent J).

I want to do something when the asylum process is over and be able to do something positive (Respondent K).

I don't want to depend on the state; I really want to work for myself, not depending with social money (Respondent L).

Other learners expressed their desire to integrate into and contribute to society:

I would like to integrate into society and to be able to work or help other people (Respondent M).

I believe this programme improve my skills and make me become a meaningful and useful person in society. I am desperately looking forward to it (Respondent N).

I would like to include myself in society (Respondent O).

I want to be useful to myself and the society (Respondent P).

I look to the prospect of both achieving my aims and contributing immensely to the community (Respondent Q).

These comments illustrate the powerfully felt need among IPAs for dignity, meaning, and community, for overcoming the institutionalized and often isolating circumstances created by DP and the resulting harms to self-esteem.

At the end of the pre-delivery phase, early consultations with stakeholders and potential participants yielded three positive developments. Firstly, open engagement facilitated the recruitment of 20 learners to the Right to Work Education Project's first workshop on Friday, 31<sup>st</sup> May. Word-of-mouth among existing participants helped the project recruit a further 20 learners as the summer progressed. This approach similarly helped engage expert stakeholders as potential contributors to the programme. Secondly, consultation and dialogue helped identify participant interests and informed the programme's design and workshop themes. The survey data showed that the delivery team needed to achieve a balance between those participants primarily seeking to pursue training for employment and self-employment and those interested in learning more around human rights and social inclusion. Thirdly, this process underlined participants' high support needs arising from the institutionalization of asylum seekers in DP. The journey to social inclusion, as one learner observed, is like 'crossing a broken bridge'. Internally, team meetings now took place concerning workshop design, including the implementation of timely wraparound supports and the creation of an inclusive learning environment.

### **Crossing a Broken Bridge: Programme Delivery**

The Right to Work Education Project's second phase (May to August) effected programme delivery. An Cosán responded to participants' expressed needs by providing wraparound supports and by creating an inclusive, participatory learning environment. In practice, a team of community educators, education technologists, and student support officers organised and delivered a series of collaborative workshops with some 40 project participants. An initial series of 5 day-long face-to-face workshops were held between Friday, 31<sup>st</sup> May and Friday, 28<sup>th</sup> June. A further 4 day-long workshops occurred from Friday, 9<sup>th</sup> August to Friday, 31<sup>st</sup> August. All workshops took place in An Cosán's Virtual Community College office on Usher's Quay in Dublin 8. Learners travelled from DP centres in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Longford, Sligo, Waterford, and Wicklow to attend. An option to join the class by webinar was also offered.

Workshops centred on participatory, group-based discussion of challenges faced by IPAs in realising their ‘right to work’ as well as relevant solutions. Bulelani Mfaco (MASI), Ellie Kisyombe (Irish Refugee Council), Aga Wiensyk (European Network Against Racism Ireland), and Alphonse Basogomba (Buheri Consultants) all provided invaluable guest presentations on self-employment, labour market access, anti-discrimination practice, refugee and migrant rights advocacy, and the right to work. An Cosán staff members, notably Suzie Cahn, Social Enterprise coordinator, and Mark Kelly, Skills to Succeed Academy coordinator, provided specific advice, information, and support concerning participants’ self-employment options as well as their employability skills, including career guidance, job-searching, CV writing and interview skills. As project lead, I drew on my background in human rights to facilitate group dialogues on the themes of ‘human rights and equality in Ireland’ and ‘rights in the workplace’.

In seeking to overcome barriers to education experienced by marginalised adult learners, An Cosán has developed a broad ecosystem of supports (Kovacic et al., 2020). Several specific wraparound supports require highlighting with respect to the Right to Work Education programme’s delivery. Project funding enabled participants to avail of free transport to and from workshop venues. Most participants joined the workshops in person, frequently travelling long distances to do so. At the same time, An Cosán offered participants a blended learning option. Learners unable to attend in person were given an option to join online by webinar. Learners were also offered access to relevant educational technology and to one-to-one support from educational technologists. The provision of supported online access to workshops in this manner facilitated the inclusion of several participants. Finally, in keeping with An Cosán’s long-standing ethos of hospitality, the project aimed to create a place of hearth and home for participants. The project delivery team was greatly assisted in this respect by the learners themselves. Moreover, project funding enabled us to partner with ‘Cooking for Freedom’, a cooking group led by women in Direct Provision in Hatch Hall, who provided additional catering and hospitality for learners.

In adult community education, process matters: what we do is of equal importance to how we do it. Building on foundational community education concepts and practices, educators facilitated participants’ building active, dialogic relationships with themselves, with each other, and with language, ideas, and the world around us (Freire, 1996). Throughout, participants

were offered the opportunity to speak freely with their peers, to articulate their personal experience, and to understand the right to work and its denial within those shared experiences. Small group, peer-to-peer discussion enabled participants to share information and solve real-life problems. These included problems created by lack of information, such as access to language classes, or by the inconsistent application of government policy, such as setting up bank accounts. These 'private troubles' in turn formed the basis of thematic, collective discussions of rights in the workplace and human rights and equality in Ireland, ensuring their further contextualisation as 'public issues' (Mills, 1959).

A vital aspect of the Right to Work Project's modelling a dialogic, solidaristic approach to learning and project decision-making was its attempt to uphold a principle of representation ('nothing about us without us'). The aim was to facilitate a diversity of voices, experiences, and identities within programme delivery. Guest contributions were arranged with refugees and migrants currently navigating the Direct Provision system as well as those who had already done so. Participants reported the particular importance of hearing from guest speakers who had previously been in Direct Provision, specifically responding to their capacity to speak from experience about their challenges and successes in seeking employment or self-employment in Ireland as well as their diverse experiences of human rights and equality. Participants drew on these discussions to problematise the current legislative framework governing IPAs' right to work and to develop alternative recommendations. Towards the project's conclusion, the group's recommendations were submitted for inclusion in the Collective Civil Society Alternative Report to the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Several important challenges to practice arose during this period. Firstly, while the initial proposal suggested working with 80 IPAs, through the course of delivery, it became clear that the team needed to work more intensively with a smaller group of 40 learners given the widely varying needs expressed in our recruitment survey and exploratory discussions. Secondly, while the original proposal identified two locations in Galway and Waterford for delivery of face-to-face workshops, this did not occur. Community Partner organisations were unavailable during the project's timeframe owing to annual leave, staff turnover, and the closure of community organisations during August. While all IPAs in Galway and in Waterford could join the Dublin workshops either in person or by webinar, several chose not to avail of these options. Ultimately, ten participants did not complete the programme. Reasons given for withdrawing

generally foregrounded external circumstances arising in DP, including lack of public transport, absence of local childcare, and competing commitments, rather than dissatisfaction with the project. Two learners exited after securing employment. These challenges offer valuable organisational learning for future projects. Lessons learned include ensuring an appropriate fit between budget allocation and recruitment targets, securing early confirmation of new delivery sites, and foregrounding the online educational supports available to distance learners early in recruitment conversations.

### **Celebrating Success and Evidencing Impact**

Celebration is an important and sometimes overlooked aspect of the care work underpinning an inclusive learning environment. During the third and final phase (September to October), An Cosán organised a concluding Award Ceremony for project participants in the offices of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). This half-day workshop combined guest speaker inputs - Rosemary Kunene (Participant / Voice of Migrants Ireland) and Michael O'Neill (IHREC) - with world-café style, small group discussions to reflect on what learners had achieved through the project as well as on what issues remained outstanding and how these could be addressed. Partner organisations represented included MASI, Voice of Migrants Ireland, Our Table, AONTAS, SPIRASI, the Irish Refugee Council, Places of Sanctuary Ireland, Business in the Community Ireland, New Communities Partnership, and Create Sound. The Project concluded with an award ceremony to celebrate learners' completion of the programme and to acknowledge and enjoy participants' learning together. Twenty participants collected awards on the day with a further ten awards delivered to participants in absentia.

Informal participant feedback to all An Cosán staff was extremely positive throughout the programme. Learners also responded anonymously to a concluding project evaluation survey. This feedback provides evidence of the Right to Work Education Project's short-term impact. Participants reported enhanced knowledge of their individual employability and self-employment skills and opportunities:

Thanks so much for all your help and mostly understanding new skills I didn't know before. Stay blessed and your crew. (Participant A)

The whole package was really great - CV writing, interview skills, employment skills etc. (Participant B).

Learners also reported enhanced understanding of their human rights, including their rights in the workplace. Participants gained new knowledge of the various support structures available to them to help realise those rights at community and state levels.

Of course, I have gained knowledge on my rights as a worker (Participant C).

I am better informed (Participant D).

I am now aware of organisations and groups that I can talk to (Participant E).

In addition to the specific education and training imparted, programme participants widened their social networks through meeting diverse participants from across Ireland. Learner feedback underlines how the project's participatory educative process facilitated their developing confidence and social capital:

The project was delivered in a participatory manner, and participants were free to openly express their feelings and learn from each other. Participants felt included and listened to (Participant F).

The workshop was helpful. I had a wonderful time learning and connecting with other people of great skills (Participant G).

I have gained so much connections with different people during the course (Participant H).

In the context of the institutionalised and often isolating circumstances created by DP, it is worth noting that this aspect of the programme was the most commented upon.

The Right to Work Education Project's medium-to-long term impact will likely emerge from the new relationships created during its delivery. Participants were introduced to representatives of supportive organisations and human rights advocates, including members of MASI and IHREC. Participants used the awards ceremony to discuss and progress potential human rights cases with IHREC, including cases concerning the availability to people in DP of driving licenses and disability accommodations. Enhanced social capital further included networking with community groups in the locality of students' DP centres. Course participants in DP in Rosslare, for example, made connections

with supportive An Cosán learners at the neighbouring South End Family Resource Centre in Wexford. A local refugee and migrant solidarity project subsequently emerged from these relationships.

### **Human Rights from below**

Reflecting on the Right to Work Education Project's genesis, delivery, and impact, it is appropriate to evaluate it as a case study in human rights education. In doing so, I wish to make a distinction between treating human rights as a specialist branch of law or international relations and realising human rights through the application of community education principles. The former, conventional view of human rights education – teaching people about their rights – can readily reflect a top-down commitment to monologue: 'It suggests that our human rights have already been defined for us by some authority that understands our rights better than we do ourselves, and that we should accept this definition uncritically' (Ife, 2003, p.202). Such an approach to human rights education parallels what Freire (1996) describes as the banking concept of education, where the educator's knowledge of what 'human rights' mean is transferred from their head to the students without transformation or critique. In contrast, teaching human rights from below requires an active, dialogic relationship between teacher and learner: 'rights need to be understood in the context of people's lived experience, especially their personal experience of human rights abuse or violation' (Ife, 2009, p.203).

Experience gained through An Cosán's Right to Work Education Project supports the claim that successful human rights education requires the latter model, specifically modelling a dialogic, solidaristic approach to learning and project decision-making. In place of simply 'banking' knowledge concerning human rights or employability, the project team sought to model human rights, dignity, and inclusivity throughout. Modelling human rights is recognised to be one of the most effective forms of human rights education:

'The old adage "do as I say, not as I do" is bad education practice in any context, but quite disastrous when we are dealing with human rights. People whose schooldays are long behind them will often have only a vague memory of what they were taught, but will have a very clear recollection of how they were treated. It is how people are treated that makes a lasting impression: whether they were treated with kindness or cruelty, whether they felt listened to or not, whether their ideas were valued or ridiculed, whether they were discriminated against or accepted on their own terms and whether they were encouraged to think creatively or to conform' (Ife, 2009, p.204).

Globally, as Western states and societies increasingly rely on militarised borders and carceral institutions or retreat into chauvinistic nationalisms, community education will likely further involve practitioners and learners in urgent questions of human rights and social inclusion. Traditional community education principles – dialogue, participation, inclusivity, social action – remain essential to meaningful human rights education and to the realisation of human rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ultimately, by foregrounding the lives and experiences of those directly affected, human rights education from below illuminates ways of realising rights against and beyond the deep structures of power that shape our world.

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