

Irish Refugee Integration Network ([IRIN](#))

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Abstract

This project report details the origins of the Irish Refugee Integration Network (IRIN) initiative, explaining why it was established and contextualising it within the broader migratory context in contemporary Ireland. It delineates the various phases this volunteer-led collective has gone through with an analysis of their constituent challenges and successes. Future developments envisaged for IRIN will also be evoked.

Keywords: Displacement, migrant education, informal education, solidarity

Introduction

In the Spring of 2022, following the conflict in Ukraine, Ireland faced an unprecedented rise in the number of people seeking International Protection (Oireachtas, 2023). In fact, this increase of 186% from 2019 considerably impacted the already strained and widely debated Irish system of reception and integration of forcibly displaced people (Day, 2020; Lentin, 2016; Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2016). This rise in people arriving in Ireland struck an emotional cord among the general population (Coveny, 2022) which ranged from demonstrations of immediate solidarity from local communities to anti-migrant marches, driven by a rise in far right populism throughout Europe (Vieta and Poynting, 2022). Against this turbulent backdrop, IRIN was formed at Dublin City University (DCU) as an active and practical response to respond to migrants' needs. Operating as a collective of staff and students, IRIN provides intercultural and linguistic supports to people in refugee-like situations.

Institutional Setting

DCU holds the proud claim of being the first designated University of Sanctuary in Ireland (UoSI). The University of Sanctuary Ireland emerged in 2017 as a national network. This

grassroots movement, which first originated in the UK in 2005, is part of a larger network of community organisations that operates with the ideal of “offer[ing] sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution” and that seeks to create “welcoming places of safety for all” (Cities of Sanctuary 2023). Institutions of Higher Education which receive the designation commit to promote and sustain the movement’s core principles which consist of learning about what it means to be seeking sanctuary; embedding positive actions to establish a sustainable culture of welcome and, finally, sharing good practice with other education institutions, the local community and beyond (Murphy, 2020). This context is important as it demonstrates that DCU has past form in supporting a culture of welcome among its staff and student bodies.

Following the recent outbreak of war in Ukraine, one particular action of note within DCU’s general multilayered response to forced migration issues was the offer of student accommodation to the State in a bid to accommodate the recently arrived refugees and relieve temporary housing pressure on a national level. Three hundred and eighty beds were made available between May 16th, 2022 and August 7th, 2022. Staff across the three campuses were encouraged to channel personal efforts through The Irish Red Cross through an official communiqué from Senior Management on April 8th, 2022. Additionally, Dr. Agnes Maillot (head of school of SALIS) sent a call to all departmental staff at this same juncture in time, sounding out who would be interested in formulating a response to a notable increase in the number of forcibly displaced people seeking International Protection in Ireland from Ukraine and other zones of conflict from a linguistic perspective as SALIS is a School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies. It is important to note that through this call a commitment was made to offer support to all International Protection Applicants (IPA), regardless of their country of origin thus moving the focus away from the Ukrainian population which was seen as benefiting from a stronger capital of sympathy from the public (Gibney, 2022). An

organisational team of four staff members came together to form a working group and elaborate a plan of action in a timely manner.

IRIN was devised in the subsequent weeks with a dedicated website live and four different levels of English language classes ready to be rolled out from May 16th onwards. The classes were non-formal and free of charge, with students able to attend on a week by week, drop-in basis. Intentionally, such flexibility was built into the offering of the classes in order to adapt to the complexity of the situation in which the IPA students find themselves in. Staff from across the three campuses that compose the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences signed up to deliver classes on a pilot phase for one month. Classes (Beginners, Lower Intermediate, Intermediate and Advanced) took place respectively from Monday to Thursday, 10 am to 12 pm, in a relaxed and comfortable room called the LanguaCulture Space. The latter is a dedicated informal, peer-led learning hub. The layout of the room is bright with comfortable furniture, providing a welcoming learning environment described as critical by scholars in the field of non-formal education. The space thus supports individuals in developing knowledge and skills as well as transversal competences, such as communication; collaboration skill as well as fostering creativity (Mara, 2020).

Rationale

Acquisition of the L1 of the host country by newly arrived migrants has been articulated as a priority across European countries as per the European Commission report of 2013 with language skills often considered as a marker for integration. Linguistic competence is perceived as a key pillar to a functional adjustment into a foreign society, including employment, education, social inclusion, and active citizenship (Ager and Strang, 2008; Nieuwboer and van't Rood 2016). However, barriers accessing adult education exist in Ireland (Beacco et al. 2014; Daniel, 2022; Sheeky, 2015). The provision of language classes in particular have been

criticised for their lack of consideration of learners' literacy levels and learning needs (Batardière et al. 2022; Čatibušić et al., 2021) as well as their reliance on voluntary work and short time duration (Daniel, 2022). In addition, in the Summer months of 2022 and given the unprecedented levels of inward migration to Ireland, state run and NGO-led organisations offering English classes were running at full capacity. In this context, it was felt that as a School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, we were in an optimum position to put in place various support structures and initiatives with a focus on the provision of language support in the first phase of the IRIN program.

Recruitment

As previously mentioned, a web page dedicated to IRIN in six different languages (English, Arabic, Spanish, French, Russian and Ukrainian) was up and running prior to the commencement of classes on May 16th 2022. A “Get in touch” functionality allowed potential students to contact the organisers as well as through an email list. Student recruitment materials primarily took the physical form of fliers that were put up in various temporary accommodation centres around Dublin city, community hubs and state run adult learning centres. Some members of the IRIN team had already established contacts with grassroots groups and as such, were able to disseminate information about the English classes on their social media networks. Word of mouth proved to be a very effective recruitment tool and the Ukrainians living on campus were also very eager to improve their English language skills.

English Classes

A key aspect of the delivery of English language classes was that volunteers would co-teach classes together. This is something that has remained a constant over the four phases. It has enabled the roll-out of subsequent phases to be sustainable in the eventuality of a volunteer

being unable to teach for a myriad of reasons such illness, timetable conflicts etc. Teaching with a colleague from another school, faculty of campus has improved collegiality and facilitated people from disparate backgrounds to deliver classes together.

The delineation of the four phases was centred around in the first instance a trial period of one month, during which a large number of mostly Ukrainian refugees arrived on campus. Four classes were held per week: Beginners, Lower Intermediate and two Intermediate. The second iteration of the programme ran from June 13th, 2022, to September 21st, 2022, essentially covering the period of the academic year when colleagues are not engaged in teaching activities. Three classes were held per week with a new nomenclature being adopted: Beginner, Beginner Plus and Intermediate. Two teachers were scheduled per slot with a third teacher timetabled as a “Reserve”. Phase Three ran from October 3rd, 2022, to December 14th, 2022, with three levels: Beginner, Lower Intermediate and Upper Intermediate. Importantly, external funding (International Protection Integration Fund) allowed for a curriculum to be designed for three different levels during this iteration. The fourth and current phase of the initiative at the time of writing this report ran from January 9th to April 13th. Two important changes underpin this phase: the inclusion of student teaching assistants in the classroom and the piloting of “Digital and Intercultural Chats and Clinics” on Thursdays.

Initial Feedback and Volunteer Experience to Date

While formal data is currently being collected, initial response to the initiative can be drawn from informal feedback from both the teacher volunteers team and the IPA language students as well as from daily posts on the dedicated forum embedded in the IRIN Moodle. This was set up as a means to foster a community of practice among all enrolled teachers, and subsequent DCU student volunteer participants. Feedback is overall very positive. Student numbers kept increasing yet we also retained some familiar faces from the beginning, some of whom have

managed to move up levels. It is also interesting to note that some of the students attend more classes than necessary, with some of them attending nearly every day. We interpret this loosely as an indication that IPA students are satisfied with the program but also feel welcome in the school. The latter is a very important dimension for us as the social aspect of the non-formal classes in a forced migration context has been proven to alleviate some of the hardship of displacement as well as engendering social inclusion (Daniel 2022). The forum posts provided a wide range of information regarding the experience of the teacher volunteers who participated in the programme, from expectations and accomplishments to challenges. Whilst DCU student volunteers were also encouraged to share their experiences in the forum, none did so. The main points made in the forum have been collated in the table below:

Table 1.

Teacher Volunteers' Feedback

Positive experiences	Challenges	Possible amendments
- Uplifting human experience (feeling useful / grateful students)		
- Pair teaching (collegiality / interdisciplinary collaboration)		
- A different teaching experience (lively and engaging students)		
	- Larger numbers of students	- Division of classes - Increased volunteer recruitment - Recruitment and active participation of DCU students as teaching assistants

	- Erratic attendance - Student punctuality	
	- Lack of clarity on appropriate level for students - No formal testing	
- Flexibility and creativity		
	- Lack of structure and continuity - Chaotic nature of the non-formal setting	- Implementation of a curriculum - Dedicated forum

Teacher participants repeatedly expressed how their participation in the project was uplifting on a human level with people stating that they felt useful and happy to contribute to a rewarding initiative. They usually remark on how engaged and lively the students are, taking part in all the activities offered to them with a level of motivation often unmatched in regular classrooms. In fact, many of the comments reveal how, for the teachers, taking part in the programme was seen as a welcome break from their usual formal teaching with the co-teaching cited prominently as a very enriching experience, improving collegiality as well as enabling interdisciplinary exchange of practice. Noticeably, while all the volunteer teachers had a background in education, only a certain number of them had previous experience in language teaching, the others coming from fields which varied from Biochemistry to Sociology and from Communication to Law.

Challenges also presented themselves along the way. While some of them were inherent to the general context and situation of the cohort which composed the target student population (erratic attendance, lack of punctuality) as well as the non-formal nature of the setting (lack of clarity regarding the exact level of student due to the absence of testing), some were due to the fact that the organising team was working in a constantly evolving environment.

Accordingly, solutions were suggested and some implemented on a more sustainable basis. The most noticeable was the implementation of a curriculum in Phase Three (October 3rd, 2022, to December 14th, 2022) which eased some of the pressure regarding preparation and lack of continuity. In that regard, it is to note that the use of the forum has been extremely useful. The renewed call for volunteers and the inclusion of the DCU student body to take part as teaching assistant during the academic year contributed to a renewed motivation from all the

volunteers. Their participation provided a solution to the larger numbers of students increasingly attending (March, 2023) by allowing Beginner classes to be split into two, therefore catering more appropriately to the wide range of levels. Finally, if the sometimes chaotic nature of the project required a certain level of adjustment from some teachers used to a more structured approach, it was also felt that it allowed room for creativity and a different teaching experience. This model attempted to strike a balance between the complexity of the lives of the students and its setting within an academic institution. Encouraging teacher volunteers to articulate how they experienced teaching in an ever-changing context recognised how challenging it was for them but also to share the positives from such a setting. The immediacy of the use of the forum enabled organisers to resolve any issues in a timely manner and share feedback in an open manner, thus truly operating as a community of practice.

Conclusion

This experience has been overwhelmingly positive for all involved, students and volunteers alike and integral to effective social integration (Sheekey, 2015). However, similar to other non-formal, flexible model educational settings, there is a necessary degree of “endearing chaos” (Daniel, 2022) that is inherent to working with people living forced migration. In fact, such initiatives heavily depend on volunteers and, as an initiative, its sustainability is core to its future continuation. When this network was conceived in April 2022, it was not envisaged that it would be still operating 18 months later but such is the case. Additional sources of funding have been secured to develop the curriculum and to pay for public transport for students to attend the classes, thus enabling this initiative to continue for another year.

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