



An Interim Evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years Continuing Professional Development (LINC+ CPD) Programme 2021 – 2023



LINC Consortium (2025) *Interim Evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years Continuing Professional Development (LINC+ CPD) Programme 2021–2023* (Kelly, L., Kerrins, L., Stafford, P., Heaney, S., Butterly, C., Heeney, T., Ring, E., O'Sullivan, L., Fortune, N., Kearns, A. and Thompson, H.), Limerick: Mary Immaculate College.

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*“If every child matters, then
it must follow as night follows
day that every early years
educator matters”*

Felicia A Huppert cited in Lovewell (2012)

Acknowledgments

The authors of this report would like to acknowledge the ongoing commitment to the success of the LINC+ CPD Programme of the three Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Consortium members – Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education (MU Froebel Dept.). Dr Linda Kelly, former LINC Programme Researcher, Liz Kerrins (ECI) and Patsy Stafford (MU Froebel Dept.) with support from Shirley Heaney, former LINC National Programme Coordinator have led this interim evaluation with the guidance of LINC Consortium colleagues Claire Butterly, Niamh Fortune, Dr Annette J. Kearns, Teresa Heaney, Dr Lisha O’Sullivan and Prof Emer Ring.

The excellence achieved by the LINC+ CPD Programme may be attributed primarily to the exceptional commitment of the thousands of LINC graduates and the early learning and care settings who have engaged with us on their LINC journey. We continue to learn from our graduates who generously share their experiences with us and enable us to develop and enrich both the LINC and LINC+ CPD Programmes from year to year. The wholehearted engagement of LINC+ participants in various surveys and research projects has enabled us to achieve our commitment to excellence in evaluating and reviewing the programme.

The LINC Consortium remains committed to delivering a high-quality, student-centred programme that supports participants in enhancing the inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in their respective settings. Mary Immaculate College retains responsibility for the academic quality of the LINC+ CPD Programme. Without the outstanding colleagues on the LINC+ team, whose commitment to excellence has created a programme of remarkable quality, the LINC+ CPD Programme would not have achieved its objectives to the level that it has.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the officials in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) for their ongoing support, guidance and advice in the implementation of the LINC+ CPD Programme.

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Helena Thompson is the Marketing, Communications and Recruitment Officer for the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme. Since joining the LINC Programme in February 2023, she has developed and implemented integrated marketing campaigns, leveraging both digital and traditional channels to enhance brand visibility, drive engagement, and support programme recruitment. Helena holds a MSc in Digital Marketing Strategy from Munster Technological University (MTU) and a BA in New Media and English from the University of Limerick (UL). She has also earned certifications in Universal Design and Digital Accessibility from Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and The Fundamentals of Digital Marketing from Google Digital Garage, further strengthening her expertise in inclusive communication and digital strategy. Her expertise spans content creation, brand development, social media strategy, and event marketing, ensuring clear, consistent, and impactful communication across all platforms. Helena's contributions have been recognised in the sector, with her team being shortlisted for Best Marketing/Communications Team at the Education Awards in 2024 and 2025.

Glossary

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
CAST	Center for Applied Special Technology
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CoP	Community of Practice
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
ECCE Programme	Early Childhood Care and Education Programme
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
ELC	Early Learning and Care
INCO	INclusion COordinator
LINC	Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MIREC	Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee
MU Froebel Dept.	Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
UDL	Universal Design for Learning

Terminology

Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings	Settings providing early education and care to children prior to their commencing primary school.
Early Childhood Teachers	Staff working in settings providing early education and care to children prior to their commencing primary school. In accordance with the rationale adopted in the <i>Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme</i> , ¹ a measured decision was made by the Consortium to adopt the term ‘early childhood teacher’ for the LINC Programme. This decision was based on John Dewey’s concept of the ‘teacher’ as an interpreter and guide as the child re-enacts, rediscovers and reconstructs his/her experience on a daily basis. The Consortium believes that this term best describes the role of all those who work with children in early years settings. ² However, the Consortium also acknowledges that terminology is inextricably linked to the wider issue of professionalisation, an examination of which remains outside the remit of this evaluation.

In this research report, a focus is maintained on the use of terminology that celebrates difference and acknowledges all of our differences as human beings. The creation of inclusive education systems able to respond appropriately to human differences remains critical in fashioning a system where diversity becomes the norm.³

1. LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme* (Ring, E., Kelleher, S., Breen, F., Heeney, T., McLoughlin, M., Kearns, A., Stafford, P., Skehill, S., Campion, K., Comerford, D. and O’Sullivan, L.), Limerick: Mary Immaculate College, available at: <https://lincprogramme.ie/research>.

2. Camp Mayhew, K. and Camp Edwards, A. (1936) *The Dewey School. The laboratory school of the University of Chicago 1896–1903*, New York: D. Appleton-Century Co.

3. Ring, E. and O’Sullivan, L. (2019) ‘Creating spaces where diversity is the norm’, *Childhood Education*, 95(2), 29–39, doi: 10.1080/00094056.2019.1593758.



Chapter One: Introduction



Introduction

Access to high quality early education and care has the potential to positively impact the lives of young children, regardless of ability, social status or cultural and ethnic background (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA] 2016). In the Republic of Ireland, the goal of realising an effective early childhood system is embedded within First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland 2018) and is encapsulated in *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE] 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2009/2024a).

In the Republic of Ireland, all children between the ages of two years, eight months and five years, six months are eligible for three hours per day of free early years participation for five days per week, 38 weeks per year, under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. In 2015, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced by the DCYA, the Department of Education (DoE) and the Department of Health (DoH), which committed the Irish government to ensuring the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with additional needs in the ECCE Programme (Inter-Departmental Group 2015).

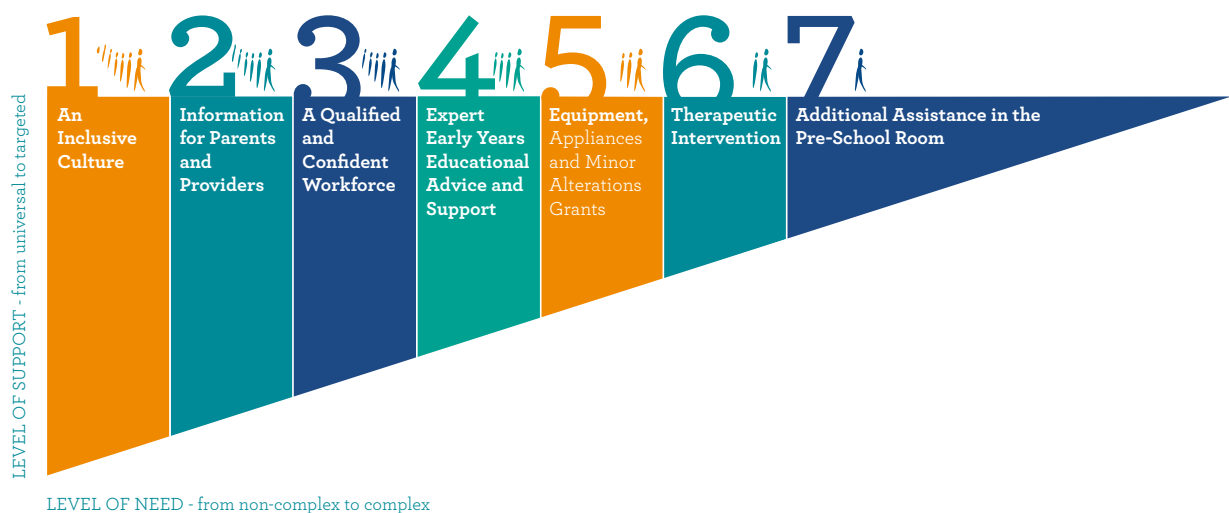
Research consistently highlights the strong link between high-quality early learning and care (ELC) provision for children and the professional competence of the early childhood teacher (e.g., Urban et al. 2011; Whitebread et al. 2015; Urban et al. 2017). It is therefore critical that early childhood teachers are equipped with the specific knowledge(s), practices and values central to providing high-quality provision to children with diverse needs, abilities and interests so that all children can thrive and achieve their full potential (Ring et al. 2018).

One strand of AIM focuses on developing a qualified and confident workforce through professional learning (Level 3; see Figure 1). Acknowledgement of the need to professionalise the sector mirrors Europe-wide strategies to improve the quality of early childhood education and care for children (Council of the European Union, 2011; Urban et al. 2011). It is also a key focus of *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028* (DCEDIY 2021), which aims to raise staff qualification levels and create professional development pathways within the early years sector in Ireland. The recent update of *Aistear*, which identifies 'Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion' as one of the nine principles of early learning and development, aligns with and strengthens the sector's mission to foster inclusion in ELC settings. *Aistear's* vision of the

educator as agentic, competent, and reflective, dedicated to ongoing professional growth, further supports this commitment (Government of Ireland 2024).

Figure 1. Access and Inclusion Model

A Model to Support Access to the ECCE Programme for Children with a Disability



To address the need for professional learning aimed at supporting inclusion in ELC settings, a higher education programme, Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC), was developed (LINC Consortium 2016 - 2020). A Consortium led by Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and including Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and Maynooth University – Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education (MU Froebel Dept.), was awarded the contract from the Higher Education Authority for the delivery of the National Higher Education Programme for INclusion COordinators in Early Years Settings. Successful graduates of the LINC Programme acquire a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 6 Special Purpose Award from MIC, Limerick and are prepared to take on the role of INclusion COordinator (INCO) in their ELC setting.

The LINC Consortium is dedicated to carrying out routine evaluations of the programme in order to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of its participants and supports them in their practice of including all children in ELC settings. Findings from the Interim Evaluation of the LINC Programme, coupled with recommendations from an external audit of the LINC Level 6 Programme, emphasised the value of supporting participants' learning and development following their graduation from the programme (LINC Consortium 2019).

In January 2020, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) issued a second request inviting tenders from higher education providers to design and deliver a specialist inclusion programme, with the focus again to support children's inclusion within the ECCE Programme. A three-year tender and subsequent two-year extension from the period of November 2020 to October 2025 was awarded to the LINC Consortium, again led by MIC, including ECI and the MU Froebel Dept. The LINC Consortium engaged in the development and delivery of the National Higher Education Programme for INclusion COordinators in Early Learning and Settings along with the development and delivery of a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Programme for existing and future graduates of the LINC Level 6 Programme, the LINC+ CPD Programme.

LINC+ CPD Programme Overview

All graduates of the LINC Level 6 Programme are eligible to participate in the LINC+ CPD Programme. The LINC+ CPD Programme commenced in May 2021, at this time there were 3,461 graduates of the LINC Level 6 Programme, and all were invited to register for the LINC+ CPD Programme.

LINC+ builds upon the content and foci of the LINC Level 6 Programme. Its learning materials align with the competency-based approach for implementing an inclusive culture, inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy in ELC settings which was developed by the LINC Consortium as a framework for the LINC Level 6 Programme (see Appendix A). An innovative design element of the LINC+ CPD Programme is that participants are encouraged to form Communities of Practice (CoPs) to provide ongoing learning and support to INCOs in their role.

The LINC+ CPD Programme is delivered entirely online and comprises six packages, each of which is approximately ten hours in duration. The packages were released between 2021 and 2023, with one package released to participants in the spring and autumn of each year. A dedicated LINC+ tutor supports participants' engagement with the programme.

The programme is fully funded by the DCEDIY, therefore there is no cost to participate in the programme. Whilst the programme is not accredited, participants can download a certificate of completion at the end of each completed package, and an overall certificate of completion when all six packages are completed. Participation in the LINC+ CPD Programme can also be included as an action in their services' Quality Action Plan, a requirement for services in receipt of Core Funding for the ELC sector to enhance the quality of provision to children.

The Role of INclusion COordinator

As previously mentioned, graduates of the LINC Programme acquire a Level 6 Special Purpose Award on the NFQ and are equipped to take on the role of INCO in their ELC setting. Foundational to the role of the INCO is supporting the full and meaningful inclusion of all children in ELC settings and initiating changes where needed to policies, curricula, pedagogical approaches, and the environment to enhance children's participation. The role also requires the appointed INCO to support all staff in the setting in the implementation of inclusive practices, to disseminate information on AIM to staff and parents, to promote the national Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (DCYA 2016) within the setting, and to use feedback from children and parents to inform the setting's inclusion procedures. A detailed overview of the key responsibilities of the INCO can be viewed in Appendix B.

The LINC Programme locates the role of INCO within a distributed leadership framework, which essentially shifts leadership responsibilities from the traditional hierarchical structure (i.e., with the setting manager on top), to recognise a flatter model, which includes other formal and informal leaders and under which leadership practice is transformed to a more relational, interactive, reciprocal and dialogical process (Harris and Spillane 2008; Spillane et al. 2004). Whilst many managers completed the LINC Programme themselves in the first few years of the programme, data from the forthcoming Evaluation of Phase Two of the LINC Programme (in preparation) indicate that the majority of successful graduates in more recent years have comprised employees in settings.

Developing effective leadership systems within the early years workforce can drive quality practice in ELC settings (Kirkby et al. 2021), and emerging research demonstrates that engaging in leadership development programmes can equip early childhood teachers of all levels to develop the competencies and confidence to adopt leadership practices within their settings (Lee et al. 2022). Distributed pedagogical leadership mirrors the LINC Programme values of collaboration, inclusivity and respect, which are conceptualised as necessary components in developing an inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy for children in ELC settings.

ELC settings that appoint an INCO who has graduated from the LINC Programme receive an extra €2 per week in capitation from the DCEIDY per ECCE-eligible child in a pre-school room. If a setting employs two LINC graduates, only one can be appointed as the official INCO for that setting. Settings with multiple LINC graduates will only receive the INCO capitation payment in relation to one graduate. However, settings are responsible for allocating inclusion-related duties and LINC graduates can work as a team. It is important to note, therefore, that not all participants on the LINC+ CPD Programme currently hold the official title and role of INCO in their setting.

LINC+ CPD Programme Aims

The broad aim of the LINC+ CPD Programme is to consolidate and deepen the existing knowledge(s), practices and values of graduates of the LINC Level 6 Programme in their role as INCO in their ELC setting. Specifically, the aims of the LINC+ CPD Programme are:

- To equip participants with the requisite knowledge(s), practices and values to lead inclusion in ELC settings and to support the implementation of AIM (Inter-Departmental Group 2015).
- To offer participants strategies and supports to enable them to respond appropriately to ensure that all children can access and fully participate in ELC settings.
- To support participants in developing family, professional and community partnerships that contribute to the creation of inclusive ELC settings.
- To support participants in the development of CoPs that provide fora for early childhood teachers to create inclusive settings.

LINC+ CPD Programme Content

As detailed previously, the LINC+ CPD Programme comprises six ten-hour packages, initially rolled out over the period of 2021 – 2023 (see Table 1 for an overview of the LINC+ CPD packages and their release dates). The first package of the LINC+ CPD Programme, Communities of Practice in Early Learning and Care, is completed by all participants before progressing on to the other packages of the programme. Once Package 1 has been completed, participants have a choice of which package to engage with next, to support the individual professional learning requirements of all participants.

Table 1. LINC+ CPD Programme packages

Package		Release Date
Package 1	Communities of Practice in Early Learning and Care	May 2021
Package 2	Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the INclusion COordinator	September 2021
Package 3	Supporting Children’s Social and Emotional Development	January 2022
Package 4	Family, Professional and Community Partnerships	September 2022
Package 5	Creating Early Learning and Care Environments where Everyone Belongs	January 2023
Package 6	Observing, Documenting, Reflecting and Planning for Inclusion	November 2023

The content of each package is specific in its links to AIM and the LINC Level 6 Programme (Inter-Departmental Group 2015; LINC Consortium 2019). It is also embedded in the five dimensions of the Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2017a; 2017b; 2017c) related to: outcomes; processes; supportive structures within the early years setting; supportive structures within the community; and supportive structures at regional/national levels. A focus on developing CoPs among participants permeates each of the LINC+ CPD Programme packages. As participants engage with each package they are encouraged to participate in tutor-facilitated CoP sessions as well as peer-led CoP sessions, which are self-directed, and use the content of the packages as catalysts for discussion. A brief summary of each package of the programme is provided below.

Package 1 – Communities of Practice in Early Learning and Care

The first package presents participants with the principles and theory underpinning CoPs and explores the benefits of engaging in CoPs for leading inclusion in ELC settings, for example, fostering professional identity of the INCO, maintaining expertise in the role, and enhancing shared practice. A key focus of the package is to equip participants with the knowledge to plan, direct and organise a CoP and related activities, and to encourage learners to reflect on and apply their experiences of learning within these CoPs.

Package 2 – Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator

The second package of the LINC+ CPD Programme supports participants in developing their understanding of the concept of distributed leadership in the ELC context. The package presents the concept of leadership as a relational, interactive, mutual, reciprocal and dialogical process, and explores effective communication and leadership strategies to support learners. The aim of the package is to further develop pedagogical leadership for inclusion through interrogating the role of the INCO as partner, facilitator, observer, and co-learner with early childhood teachers, children, families, other professionals, and the broader community.

Package 3 – Supporting Children’s Social and Emotional Development

Package 3 seeks to provide participants with the knowledge and strategies to support children’s social inclusion in the ELC setting through examining key theories and concepts related to social and emotional development. Participants are encouraged to develop insight into how children’s responses to their environment can be understood in addition to acquiring a knowledge and understanding of a range of strategies to support children’s communication and interactions. Creating environments that support children’s social and emotional development is also explored, both indoors and outdoors. In particular, the concept of ‘nature pedagogy’ is presented to learners as a context for supporting children’s social and emotional development.

Package 4 – Family, Professional and Community Partnerships

Package 4 seeks to develop learners’ understanding and appreciation of the role of families in children’s early experiences and to provide participants with a range of strategies to foster partnerships with families and cultivate family-friendly ELC settings. A range of strategies for supporting the child’s home learning environment and supporting children’s engagement in the wider community are explored. The content also explores the potential consequences of the INCO/early childhood teachers being the first professional to identify that a child may have an additional need and the appropriate manner in which to discuss these concerns with the child’s family. Additionally, participants are introduced to the work of multi-disciplinary professionals in ELC settings such as paediatric occupational therapists, physiotherapists and speech and language therapists, and become familiarised with the therapeutic resources and programmes that these professionals use to support a child’s developmental needs.

Package 5 – Creating Early Learning and Care Environments where Everyone Belongs

The aim of this package is to support learners in acquiring a knowledge of the diverse ways in which children in ELC settings learn and the importance of providing inclusive environments that cater to everybody. This package seeks to provide participants with the awareness of a range of learning and teaching strategies and approaches to promote the participation of all children in ELC settings. Participants are introduced to a range of specific interventions and resources which are available to support all children (e.g., guidance on supporting children's independent toileting). A range of strategies associated with a universal design approach to support all children's belongingness, engagement, and learning is also explored.

Package 6 – Observing, Documenting, Reflecting and Planning for Inclusion

Package 6 interrogates the central role of observing, documenting, and planning for inclusion. The role of observation in supporting children's learning and development is explored, and participants are provided with a range of strategies to document children's achievements. The role of planning and review in creating inclusive ELC settings is explored. Crucially, participants are encouraged to reflect on the child's agency in the planning process.

Programme Delivery

The LINC+ CPD Programme is delivered 100% online, hosted on the Moodle learning platform (MIC 2025), and primarily utilises asynchronous delivery elements with optional synchronous sessions with the programme tutor. In developing the lessons and supporting resources to deliver content for each package, specific attention was directed towards ensuring accessibility to a diverse cohort of learners (e.g., utilising audio and visual tools to help conceptualise the content so that the online presentations are as appealing and accessible as possible to all learner types). The andragogical approach underpinning the programme is based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL; Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST] 2018; 2024).

Asynchronous Pre-Recorded Lessons

The units of the individual packages on the LINC+ CPD Programme each comprise online pre-recorded lessons, developed by experts in the relevant field. In addition to voiced-over slideshow presentations, the lessons variously include videos, podcasts, links to external supporting resources (e.g., academic articles; policy documents; webpages), and activities to be completed by learners. Participants can engage with these lessons in their own time and upon completion of each unit, the next unit is automatically released to the learner.

Throughout the lessons, participants are regularly provided with opportunities to pause and reflect on the implications of the professional learning content for their practice. These reflections are prompted by, inter alia, video clips; podcasts; targeted reading; visual cues and prompts; and case studies. Whilst there are no graded assignments on the LINC+ CPD Programme, quizzes and activities such as word clouds, reflections, and discussion forum posts included in the online lessons provide participants with opportunities to simultaneously gauge their own learning and to learn from one another. Participants are also encouraged to keep a reflective learning journal to document their learning throughout the programme.

The andragogical strategies employed by the programme focus on the three key areas of communication, participation and acquisition (Ryan and Ring 2015), summarised in Table 2. These strategies have been successfully employed and operationalised in the context of the LINC Level 6 Programme previously.

Table 2. LINC+ CPD Programme andragogical approach

Key Area of Focus	Andragogical Strategies
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activating students' prior knowledge and experience. • Integrating modes of representing knowledge (e.g. utilising verbal explanation; video clips; story/anecdote based on real-life experience). • Providing opportunities for students to connect with practical experience/practice. • Utilising self-assessment strategies through quizzes; checklists and reflections. • Employing discussion fora and synchronous CoP sessions.
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a dialogic learning space which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > encourages students to think critically > provides students with feedback > encourages meaningful and extended contributions and exchanges > fosters professional engagement with course content.
Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employing a wide range of assessments such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > quizzes > reflections > interrogation of case-studies

Synchronous Communities of Practice Sessions

CoPs are groups of people who share a common interest or concern, and who engage in collective learning by interacting on an ongoing basis to advance their expertise in that area (Wenger et al. 2002). Members come together within a CoP to, inter alia, build and exchange knowledge and skills, create networks, problem-solve, and through this process develop recognition and a shared sense of identity (ibid). Wenger and colleagues (2002) referred to three structural elements upon which CoPs are established: domain; community; and practice:

- **Domain** - as previously mentioned, CoPs are defined by a shared domain of interest or concern (e.g., for INCOs this domain might be leading inclusion in ELC settings). The domain provides the CoP with its identity and purpose and is what motivates members to participate in the community.
- **Community** – whilst people outside of the CoP may share the same interest in a particular domain, the community refers to the interaction of members through activities, discussions, relationship building, sharing knowledge of practice, engaging in reflection, and co-creation of knowledge. Collective learning relative to the particular domain of concern takes place through these interactions.
- **Practice** – members of CoPs are practitioners (e.g., INCOs in ELC settings). The practice is the focus around which the community develops and anchors learning in its practical applications. Together, practitioners develop a shared repertoire of resources which they can apply to their individual settings.

For LINC graduates who already possess a working knowledge of the early years sector, the realities of practice, and how to implement inclusive practices, CoPs can be an appropriate form of professional learning to bolster and extend existing knowledge, practices and values. Through regular engagement, CoPs can assist LINC+ CPD participants in developing their unique perspectives on inclusive practice, reflect upon their practice, acquire new knowledge and skills, generate resources and, in turn, enhance their practice, particularly as it relates to the inclusion of all children. Through negotiating and developing a shared understanding of their domain through interacting with their CoP, LINC+ participants can begin to build a mutually negotiated competence around their shared practice.

To support participants in developing the skills and relationships to establish their own CoPs, each package of the LINC+ CPD Programme was designed to host two types of optional CoP session – a tutor-facilitated CoP session and a peer-led session, which is self-directed. These sessions are facilitated through the Moodle learning platform (MIC 2025), using the BigBlueButton (2025) technology. The intention underpinning this element of the programme design was that the knowledge and information gleaned from engaging with the packages of the programme would act as catalysts for discussion, sharing of practice, and for generating new ways of working. Those who participated were organised into groups according to geographical location. Topics for discussion for peer-led sessions were also suggested in emails from the programme tutor who additionally included links to resources such as policy documents and videos to stimulate conversations. Thus, whilst support is provided by the LINC+ tutor and learning materials, members are encouraged to exercise autonomy over their community and take charge of the knowledge they share and create (Garfield 2010).

LINC+ CPD Programme Interim Evaluation Scope and Aims

The purpose of the present research is to conduct an interim evaluation of the extent to which the LINC+ CPD Programme is achieving its aim of consolidating and deepening the existing knowledge(s), practices and values of graduates of the LINC Level 6 Programme for the enhancement of inclusion in ELC settings by investigating the following indicators:

1. Participant satisfaction with their experiences of the LINC+ CPD Programme.
2. The appropriateness of the programme's online asynchronous model of delivery, modes of learning, and course content in providing strategies and supports to participants to enable them to lead inclusive ELC settings.
3. The experiences and motivations of participants in developing and engaging in CoPs, and the contributions made through peer engagement and peer learning to the enhancement of practice, particularly as it relates to inclusion.
4. The extent to which graduates are developing their professional competence as it relates to leading inclusion through engagement with LINC+.

The interim evaluation focuses on the extent to which Packages 1 – 3 of LINC+ are achieving these aims. The data, as they were gathered, have continuously informed the updating and improvement of the programme. It is also envisaged that the data from this interim evaluation will contribute to an understanding at policy and practice levels about the impact of professional learning on cultivating inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in the early years; and provide preliminary insight into how the LINC+ CPD Programme informs how early childhood teachers, services, and children and families experience inclusion in the early years.

Summary

The LINC+ CPD Programme is a professional learning programme for all graduates of the LINC Level 6 Programme, devised to support early childhood teachers in leading and creating inclusive environments where all children are enabled to flourish and achieve their potential. The broad aim of the interim evaluation of LINC+ was to investigate how well the programme is progressing in extending and affirming graduates' knowledge(s), practices and values to enhance inclusion in ELC settings, in its first three packages. Chapter Two details the evaluation framework adopted by the research, and the methods employed as part of the programme evaluation.



Chapter Two: Methodology



Methodology

Similar to the evaluation of the LINC Level 6 Programme (LINC Consortium 2019; 2024), the present research considers an adapted version of the five critical levels of data collection and analysis for evaluating programmes of professional learning proposed by Guskey (2002). The five levels of data collection comprise: participants' reactions; participants' learning; organisational support and change; participants' use of new knowledge and skills; and outcomes for children (see Figure 2). Levels 1 and 2 are the primary focus of the interim phase of the LINC+ evaluation, with some emerging data presented for Levels 3, 4 and 5.

Figure 2. A model for evaluating a professional learning programme (adapted from Guskey 2002)



In order to gain insight into LINC+ participants' reactions to the programme and its impact on their learning and practice, a multi-method evaluation was developed. This multi-method approach comprised:

1. Online satisfaction surveys distributed to all participants upon completion of each package of the LINC+ CPD Programme, in addition to an online anonymous exit survey distributed to participants who withdrew from LINC+.
2. An online qualitative survey distributed to a purposefully selected sample of participants who completed the first three packages of LINC+.
3. Online focus groups conducted with this same purposefully selected sample of participants.

These online methods were deemed appropriate due to the familiarity of target participants with online fora in the context of engaging with the LINC Level 6 and LINC+ Programmes. Ethical approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC).

Online Satisfaction Surveys

Online surveys are an important self-report tool in social research that offer a convenient and efficient approach to capturing participant experiences, opinions, attitudes, knowledge and behaviours (Johnson and Christensen 2017; Vehovar and Lozar Manfreda 2017). Quantitative surveys based on closed-ended questions permit the investigation of meaningful patterns within data, whilst the inclusion of open-ended questions can provide further insight into participants' lived experiences.

Package Satisfaction Surveys

Upon completion of each package of the LINC+ CPD Programme, all participants were provided with a link to complete an anonymous survey on their experience of that package. The surveys were conducted using an online survey tool, namely SurveyMonkey (2025). A cover sheet explained the survey's purpose, emphasised the voluntary and confidential nature of participation, and provided contact details for LINC+ CPD Programme personnel and the MIREC.

Each survey comprised Likert scale and open-ended questions which focused on participant satisfaction with the package overall; their satisfaction with specific aspects of the package (e.g., content and delivery, support from the tutor); satisfaction with the online, asynchronous mode of learning; and how well participants felt the package developed their competence to lead inclusion in their early learning and care (ELC) setting. Participants were also asked to rate their satisfaction with the online community of practice (CoP) sessions, whether they had formed or joined their own CoP from their engagement with the LINC+ CPD Programme, and the barriers and/or enablers they have encountered as part of this process. Please see Appendix C for a sample package satisfaction survey.

At the time of undertaking the interim evaluation of the programme, there had been four intakes of participants to LINC+ (see Table 3).

Table 3. Intakes to LINC+ CPD Programme 2021-2022

Cohort	Start date
1	May 2021
2	November 2021
3	April 2022
4	October 2022

Amendments (discussed in further detail in Chapter 7) were made to the content and delivery of Packages 1 and 2 of the LINC+ CPD Programme based on feedback from Cohorts 1 and 2 obtained via the package satisfaction surveys. As a result, Cohorts 3 and 4 were delivered a revised iteration of Packages 1 and 2. The data in the subsequent sections of this report are therefore presented separately for Cohorts 1/2 and Cohorts 3/4 in order to reflect the fact that the contents and delivery of Packages 1 and 2 differed from each other.

The fifth cohort was enrolled in the programme in April 2023, therefore, responses to the package satisfaction surveys collected up until the end of March 2023 were included in the present report. The breakdown of participant responses to the package satisfaction surveys is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Breakdown of respondents to package satisfaction surveys by cohort

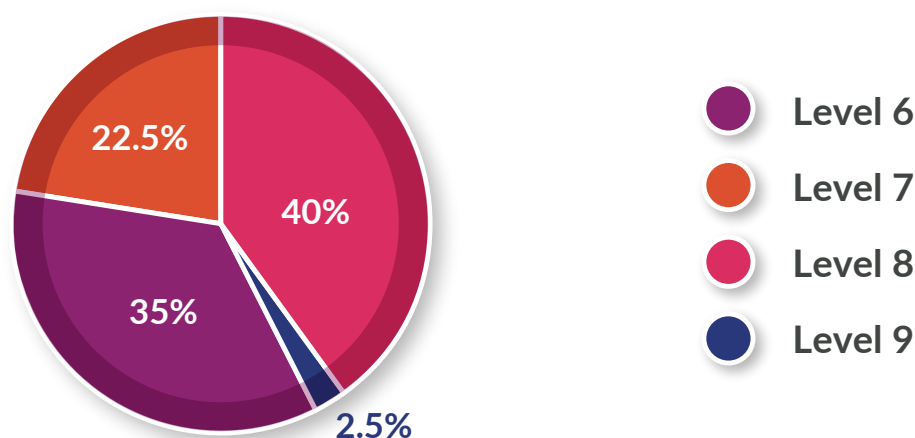
	Package 1	Package 2	Package 3
Cohort 1/2	n = 244	n = 197	n = 275
Cohort 3/4	n = 122	n = 44	n = 50

Exit Survey

An online anonymous exit survey was distributed to participants who withdrew from the LINC+ CPD Programme. The survey was presented to participants via SurveyMonkey (2025) and explored participants' reason(s) for leaving the programme and their intention to return to the programme in the future (please see Appendix D).

In total, the exit survey was distributed to 156 participants who had withdrawn from the LINC+ CPD Programme between the period 27/04/2021 and 20/07/2022. The survey was completed by 40 participants, constituting a response rate of 25%. The distribution of respondents who completed the exit survey according to their highest qualification level in early education and care to date is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Participants' qualification levels who withdrew from LINC+ (n=40)



Online Qualitative Survey

An online qualitative survey was distributed to a purposefully selected sample of participants who completed the first three packages of the LINC+ CPD Programme. Qualitative surveys are a flexible technique of data collection which comprise a series of open-ended questions that are focused on a particular topic. This approach has the potential to offer detailed, focused and nuanced insights into complex phenomena of interest, comparably rich to data collected via participant interview (Braun and Clarke 2013; Braun et al. 2021).

The use of qualitative surveys to gain insight into the lived experience of participants offers a number of benefits, both to researchers and participants. Given the wide geographical spread of LINC+ CPD Programme participants, this method permitted an affordable, convenient approach to including a diverse range of participants in the research. For early childhood teachers who work full-time in ELC settings, this approach also allowed participants to complete the survey at a time which suited them best. As previously mentioned, the target participants also had high familiarity with online means of communication from their experiences of completing the LINC Level 6 Programme and through their experience of the LINC+ CPD Programme thus far.

The aims of the present qualitative survey were to gain insight into 1) the competencies participants developed through engaging with the LINC+ CPD Programme; and 2) the extent to which the programme provided strategies and supports to participants to enable them to lead inclusive ELC settings. Survey questions explored participants' motivations for undertaking the LINC+ CPD Programme, the knowledge, values, skills and strategies participants obtained and/or developed from their participation in the programme to date, and how they reported that this is evidenced in their practice.

Participants were invited to share extracts from their reflective learning journals, which they were advised to keep for the duration of the programme, in their responses if they wished. The survey was presented to participants via the SurveyMonkey (2025) platform (see Appendix E for a copy of the survey).

Online Focus Groups

The online focus groups aimed to explore participants' experiences within their CoPs, which they were encouraged and supported to form and develop through their engagement with the LINC+ CPD Programme. Focus groups are a qualitative research method which use guided discussions of identified research topics within an interactive group setting to gain an insight into participants' lived experiences, in their own words (Greene and Harris 2011). Wenger and Snyder (2000) proposed that the best approach to measuring the effects of CoPs is by *"listening to members' stories, which can clarify the complex relationships among activities, knowledge, and performance"* (p. 145).

Compared to one-to-one interviews, it has been evidenced that participants in a group setting may produce more spontaneous responses and greater elaboration on topics of interest through interactions between participants (Guest 2017; Kitzinger 1994). Focus groups can provide insight into participants' shared understanding of certain topics in addition to potentially differing perspectives (Gibbs 1997). For a study specifically exploring CoPs, which rely on group processes, focus group discussions may offer a level of ecological validity for idea generation and reflection which one-to-one interviews may not.

The focus groups were conducted online via Microsoft Teams (Microsoft 2025). Research suggests that participants find videoconferencing to be an acceptable medium through which to partake in qualitative data collection (e.g., Archibald et al. 2019). The focus group discussions were guided by a structured script which interrogated participants' motivations and experiences of forming/joining and engaging in their CoP; participants' experiences of learning within their CoP; and the contribution of peer engagement and peer learning to the enhancement of practice and the enhancement of inclusion in the early years (see Appendix F for interview schedule). The conversation around these topics was permitted to flow naturally within the groups with interjections from the moderator to probe for further information and elaboration as appropriate and/or to encourage quieter members of the group to share their perspectives.

The focus group discussions were video recorded and transcribed using the Microsoft Teams live transcription function (Microsoft 2025). The audio of the recordings was extracted and stored on an encrypted computer whilst the video files were permanently deleted.

Purposive sampling was employed to select 9 participants to partake in the online qualitative survey and focus group interviews, stratified on the basis of regional dispersion of LINC+ CPD Programme participants and the model of CoP formed/joined. According to internal LINC Programme data, approximately 52% of LINC+ CPD Programme participants are based in Leinster (21% in Dublin); 28% in Munster; 13% in Connacht; and 7% in Ulster. The model of CoP joined/formed by participants was also considered in the recruitment process (e.g., online vs in-person CoPs (or combination); CoP members are all INclusion COordinators (INCOs) vs CoPs comprising INCOs in addition to other early childhood teachers/other relevant professionals; newly formed CoPs vs pre-established CoPs with which INCOs are already engaging).

Nine participants completed the online qualitative survey, eight of whom also took part in a focus group. See Table 5 for a breakdown of participant demographic information.

Table 5. Participant demographic information

Demographic variable	
Years working in sector	7 – 40 years (M = 20.67, SD = 9.94)
Region	67% Leinster; 33% Munster
Location type	56% urban; 44% rural
Service type	44% sessional; 44% full-time; 12% part-time

Two focus groups were conducted in total. Focus Group 1 comprised five participants, none of whom were currently engaged in a CoP with other LINC+ participants. Focus Group 2 comprised three participants each of whom was currently engaged in a WhatsApp-based CoP (WhatsApp 2025) with other LINC+ participants.

Based on findings collected from the focus groups, significant changes were incorporated into the format of the LINC+ CoPs and level of support provided to participants in establishing their peer-led CoPs (see Chapter Seven). The next wave of recruitment will target participants who avail of this support in order to measure feedback on these changes.

Analytic Strategy

The quantitative data compiled from the online package satisfaction surveys and the exit survey were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS Version 26 to generate frequencies and proportions (IBM Corp. 2019). Open-ended questions were coded using a content analysis in NVivo (QSR International 2018).

Transcripts of the focus group discussions and responses to the qualitative survey were analysed in NVivo (QSR International 2018) using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). RTA is a well-established approach to analysing focus group data and the literature also highlights its application in qualitative survey analysis (Braun et al. 2021). Thematic analysis is a flexible method for describing patterns in qualitative data through the identification, organisation, construction and rich description and interpretation of themes within the data to understand their broader meanings and implications as they relate to a study’s research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). Taking a semantic approach, themes were identified from the explicit meanings of the present data. This analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recursive six-phase guide to thematic analysis, as summarised in Table 6. This was an inductive process, whereby the coding was primarily data-driven (Thomas 2006).

Table 6. Braun & Clarke’s (2006) steps for thematic analysis

Step 1.	Become familiar with dataset
Step 2.	Code data
Step 3.	Collate codes into initial themes
Step 4.	Develop and review themes
Step 5.	Refine, define and name themes
Step 6.	Write-up

Quantifying terms

In order to express numbers of participants in a consistent manner throughout the report, a list of quantifying terms was devised, with corresponding percentages of participants denoted by each term (see Table 7).

Table 7. Terms adopted to quantify numbers of participants

Quantifying term	% of total participants denoted
Almost all	91 – 100%
Most	76 – 90%
The majority	51 – 75%
Many	31 – 50%
Some	16 – 30%
A few	1 – 15%

Please note that all participant quotations included in the report are presented verbatim.

Summary

The LINC+ CPD Programme interim evaluation is framed by an adapted version of the Guskey (2002) model for evaluating programmes of professional learning. A multi-methodological approach was developed as part of the LINC+ evaluation, comprising satisfaction surveys, a qualitative survey, and focus groups. The findings are presented in the following chapters (Chapters Three – Six), with each chapter dedicated to addressing one specific research question within the overarching evaluation: Chapter Three explores participants’ overall satisfaction with their experiences of the LINC+ CPD Programme; Chapter Four interrogates the appropriateness of the programme’s online asynchronous model of delivery, modes of learning, and course content in providing strategies and supports to participants to enable them to lead inclusive ELC settings; Chapter Five investigates the experiences and motivations of participants in developing and engaging in CoPs, and the contributions made through peer engagement and peer learning to the enhancement of practice, particularly as it relates to inclusion; and Chapter Six measures the extent to which graduates are developing their professional competence as it relates to leading inclusion through engagement with the LINC+ CPD Programme. Chapter Seven describes the evolution of the LINC+ CPD Programme in response to the ongoing evaluation and addresses future avenues for programme development.



Chapter Three: Participant Overall Satisfaction with LINC+

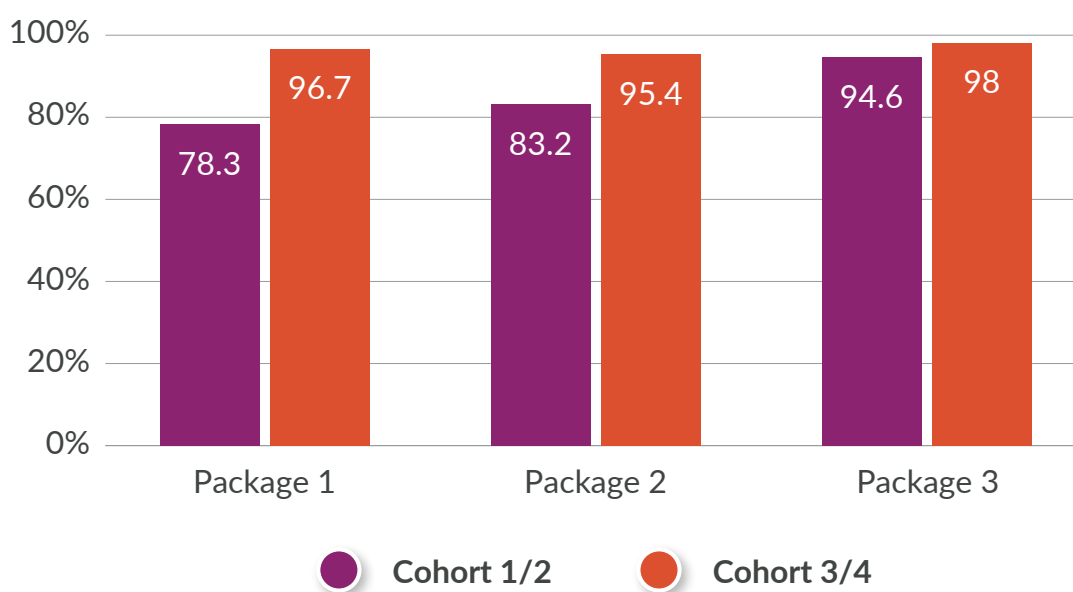


Participant Overall Satisfaction with LINC+

According to Guskey (2002), an important element of evaluating programmes of professional learning is measuring participants' satisfaction with their experience of taking part. This feedback highlights the acceptability of the programme to participants and may also provide helpful data for improving the design and delivery of educational programmes. Following completion of each package of LINC+, participants were invited to complete a survey on their experience of that package (see Table 4, Chapter Two for the breakdown of responses to each survey). Participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with each package overall, on a scale ranging from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. The proportions of participants who reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with Packages 1 – 3 are illustrated in Figure 4 below.

As previously mentioned, Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 partook in the first iteration of Packages 1 and 2 whilst Cohort 3 and Cohort 4 engaged with the second iteration of these two packages, which were amended and developed following feedback from the earlier evaluation surveys. Thus, results pertaining to Cohorts 1/2 are presented separately from those pertaining to Cohorts 3/4. Package 3 did not undergo any significant changes between the different cohorts, however, for consistency and to capture the variable of time, the results are also presented separately for Cohorts 1/2 and Cohorts 3/4. For further information on the breakdown of results by package, see Appendix G.

Figure 4. Participant satisfaction with Packages 1 – 3



As part of the online surveys, participants were also invited to list three positive aspects of each package of LINC+. In total, 1,866 positive aspects were listed by 661 respondents across the satisfaction surveys for Packages 1 – 3 (Cohorts 1 – 4). Comments from participants tended to be brief and were similar across the different package surveys and cohorts (see Tables 10 – 15 in Appendix G for a content analysis of the data pertaining to each package). Thus, responses were pooled across each survey and a word frequency analysis was conducted using NVivo (QSR International 2018) to generate the top 100 commented terms. Words with the same stem were grouped together (e.g., practice, practical). The findings are illustrated in word cloud format in Figure 5. The most frequently occurring word was ‘information’ which, along with words with the same stem (informative, informed) was repeated 173 times. Out of the top 100 most frequently occurring words, words that were the least frequent (smallest font in word cloud) were repeated 12 times (e.g., ‘presentation’).

Figure 5. Top 100 most frequently cited positive aspects of Packages 1 – 3



Overall, responses emphasised participants’ satisfaction with the programme’s content, resources and the new information and practical ideas gleaned from their participation that have benefitted their practice and children in settings.

Summary

A sizeable increase in overall satisfaction with Packages 1 and 2 was observed between Cohorts 1/2 and Cohorts 3/4: 78% and 83% of Cohorts 1/2 were satisfied/very satisfied with Package 1 and Package 2, respectively. Cohorts 3/4 were delivered the current updated iterations of Packages 1 and 2 and all four cohorts were delivered the current iteration of Package 3. Participants comprising Cohorts 3/4 reported their satisfaction with Packages 1 – 3 as follows:

- 97% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied with Package 1.
- 95% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied with Package 2.
- 98% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied with Package 3.

These increases in satisfaction are reassuring and are welcome given the improvements made to the programme based on feedback from Cohorts 1/2.

Results of a word cloud analysis of positive aspects listed by respondents to the surveys corroborated these high levels of satisfaction, and emphasised the significance of the programme's content, resources and practical information in supporting learners in their practice of including all children.

Chapter Four: Appropriateness of LINC+ Content and Delivery



Appropriateness of LINC+ Content and Delivery

Another key component of evaluating programmes of professional learning is measuring the appropriateness of the programme's content and delivery in enhancing participants' learning and professional development (Guskey 2002). This section outlines participants' satisfaction with the LINC+ online asynchronous model of delivery, modes of learning, and course content in providing strategies and supports to learners to enable them to lead inclusive early learning and care (ELC) settings.

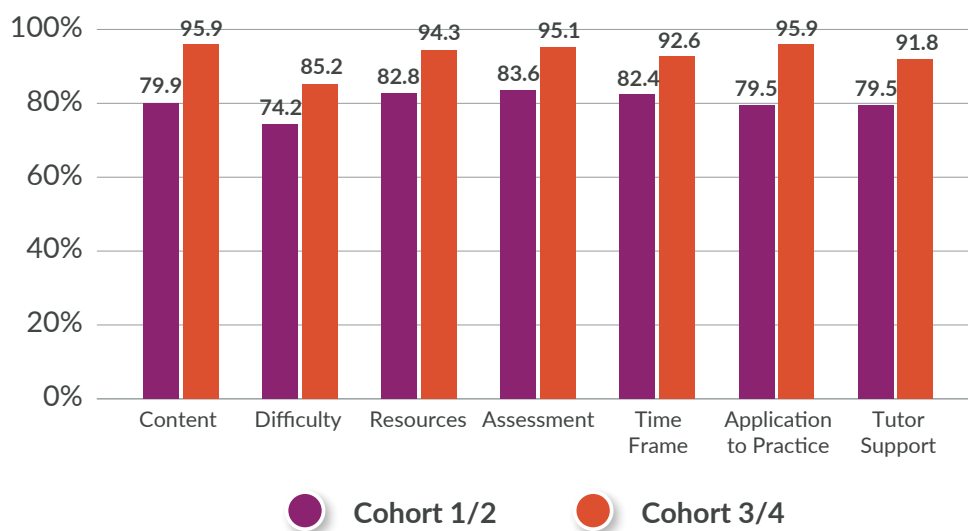
Satisfaction with Aspects of LINC+

As part of the online package evaluation surveys, participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with various aspects pertaining to their learning experience (e.g., content of package; time frame; tutor support). Results, illustrated in the following sections, compare findings between Cohorts 1/2 and 3/4 and are presented separately for each package.

Package 1

Participants belonging to Cohort 1/2 (n = 244) reported the highest level of satisfaction with the assessment of Package 1 and lower satisfaction with the package difficulty. Participants belonging to Cohort 3/4 (n = 122) reported the highest level of satisfaction with the content and application to practice of Package 1, and lower satisfaction with the package difficulty. Results are illustrated in Figure 6.

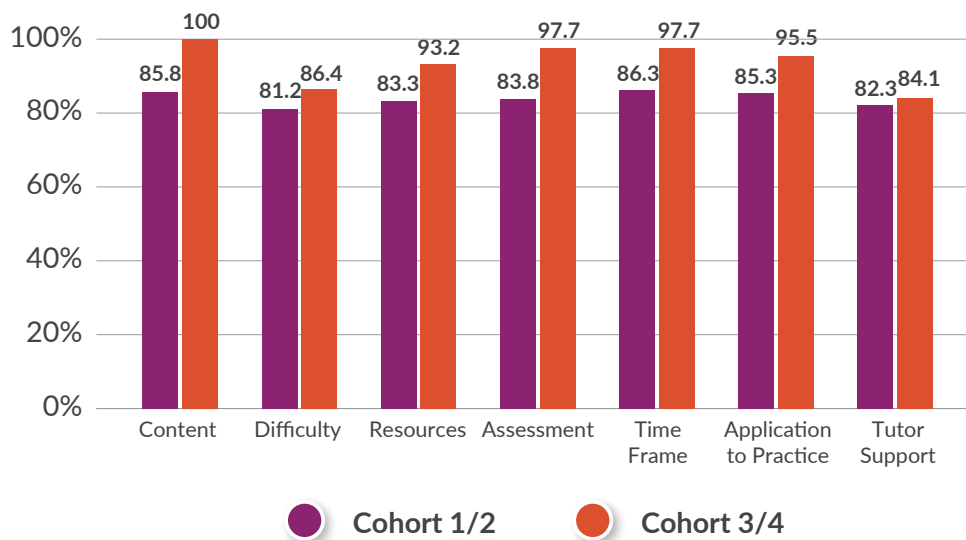
Figure 6. Participant satisfaction with aspects of Package 1



Package 2

Participants belonging to Cohort 1/2 (n = 197) reported the highest level of satisfaction with the time frame of Package 2 and lower satisfaction with the package difficulty. Participants belonging to Cohort 3/4 (n = 44) reported the highest level of satisfaction with the package content and lower satisfaction with the tutor support on the package. Results are illustrated in Figure 7.

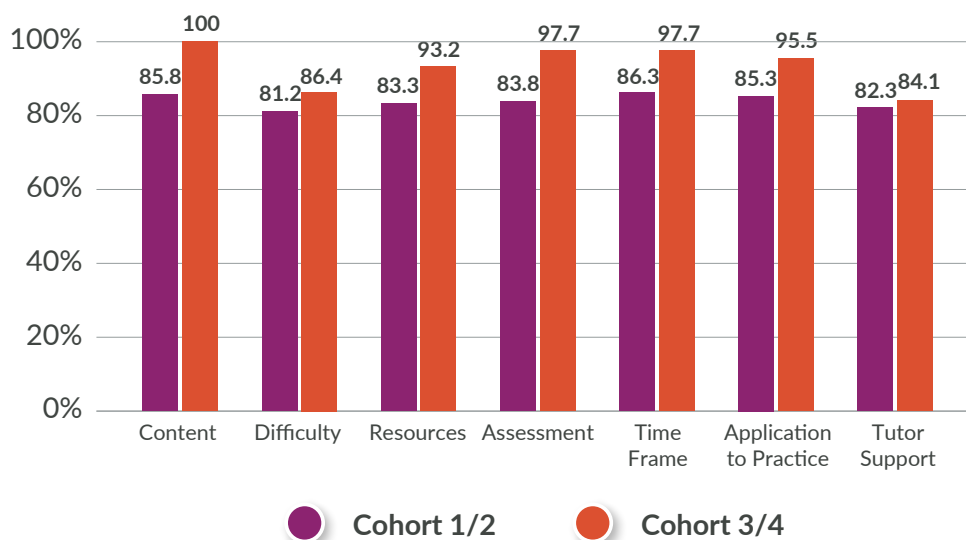
Figure 7. Participant satisfaction with aspects of Package 2



Package 3

Participants belonging to Cohort 1/2 (n = 275) reported the highest level of satisfaction with the content of Package 3 and lower satisfaction with the package difficulty. Participants belonging to Cohort 3/4 (n = 50) reported the highest levels of satisfaction with the package's resources and its application to practice. Participants reported lower satisfaction with the package difficulty. Results are illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Participant satisfaction with aspects of Package 3

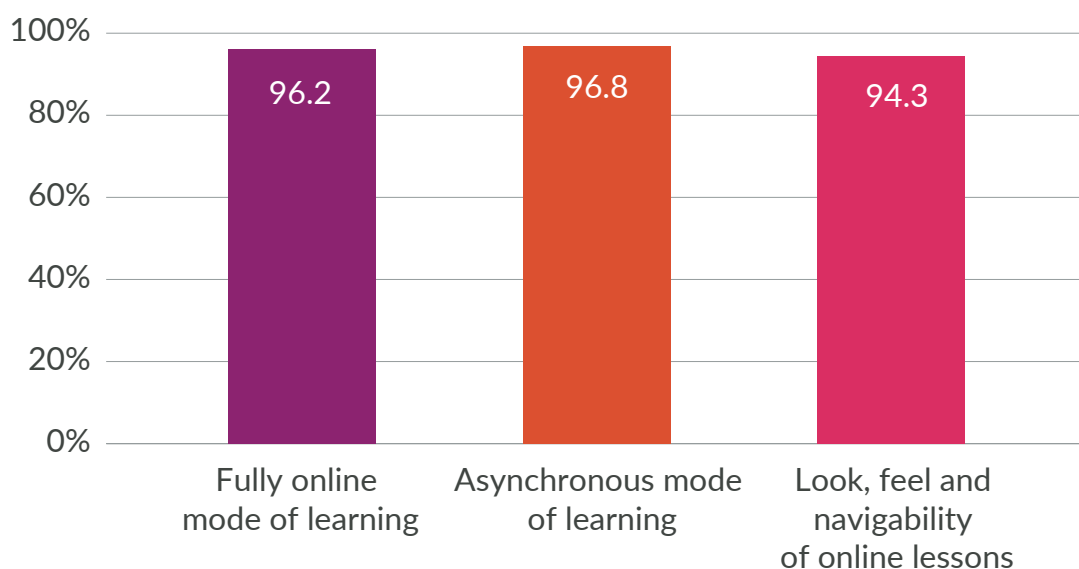


When asked to list three things they would change about each package, 5% of aspects listed by Cohorts 1/2 referred to the repetition in content and that the units were overly drawn-out (3%). Approximately 3% of aspects listed by Cohorts 1/2 referred to the time frame and release dates of the units. The most frequently recurring aspects to change listed by Cohorts 3/4 focused on wanting more practical examples (3%) and reducing the overall content contained in the units (3%). Please note that across all surveys, approximately 11% of participants indicated they would not change anything about the LINC+ packages. For further information on the breakdown of results by package, please see Appendix G.

Satisfaction with Online Learning

Participants were next asked to rate their experience of the programme's asynchronous, online model of learning. As this question pertained to the LINC+ CPD Programme more generally, participant responses were averaged across the Package 1, 2 and 3 survey evaluations. **Please note, this question was included in the surveys distributed to Cohorts 3/4 only (n = 216).** The findings are illustrated in Figure 9. Almost all participants reported feeling satisfied/very satisfied with the programme's fully online mode of learning, the asynchronous (pre-recorded lessons) mode of learning, and the look, feel, and navigability of the online lessons.

Figure 9. Participant satisfaction with experience of online learning



Participants were invited to provide additional comment on their experience of engaging with the packages of the LINC+ CPD Programme online, if they wished.

A few comments (12%) captured participants' general satisfaction with the delivery of the LINC+ CPD Programme. Prior to commencing the programme, one participant had been nervous to engage with a professional learning course fully online.

I was apprehensive starting this course as it has been a while since I completed the LINC course and was afraid that I would not manage it fully online, but I actually find I am enjoying the refresh, the content and the support from our lecturer. I look forward to the next package.

A few comments (12%) emphasised that participants found the online packages of the programme easy to navigate, whilst other comments (7%) referred to the andragogy-related aspects of the programme which participants felt accommodated a variety of learning styles. For instance, one participant commended the availability of closed captions and felt that seeing and hearing the lesson voiceovers was beneficial to them. Another participant expressed that the range of media included in the online lessons was engaging.

The modules were very well put together, there was a great flow to the content and the additional reading was very informative and the inclusion of range of media was very engaging.

A few comments (12%) elaborated that the online, asynchronous delivery of the programme allows participants to fit studying in around family life and other commitments, relieving pressure on learners. One participant elaborated that they were "really impressed with how you can work at your own pace and in your own way".

A few comments (14%) highlighted elements of the programme's design and delivery which helped bridge the gap for participants between distance and in-person learning. One participant expressed that insights gained from listening to the tutors discussing outdoor pedagogy on the podcast included in Package 3 were beneficial. As captured in a previous quote, one participant who had initial reservations about engaging with a programme online, emphasised the support of the LINC+ tutor in providing an enjoyable experience. A few comments (5%) highlighted participants' appreciation for the opportunities for peer learning and engagement with fellow LINC graduates provided by the programme. Finally, one participant found the personal examples and

experiences shared by the LINC+ tutor enhanced their experience of engaging with the programme. This participant also commended the online resources provided by the programme.

It was nice to hear a variety of voices. I liked the personal examples – it made it feel that the tutor was talking to me about her experiences. I liked taking time reading the attachments and downloading them to go back over them and use as referenced material about the different topics.

On the other hand, a few comments (14%) highlighted several challenges participants faced when engaging with a programme of professional learning fully online. Most of these comments (10%) referred to initial and ongoing difficulties with navigating the online learning platforms, Moodle (MIC 2025) and the BigBlueButton (2025), however, one participant again commended the support and availability of the LINC+ tutor in providing guidance in this regard. One participant expressed that they felt lost engaging with the amount of content contained in the programme packages and felt in-person delivery would have been more straightforward and less time-consuming.

I started the course full of enthusiasm but soon got bogged-down with trying to get a handle on the elements i.e. packages, units, etc. I felt 'lost' every time I returned to the course...I also felt the course was extremely long, and when I feel 'lost' was hard to engage with as a result...This is where attendance in person has benefits.

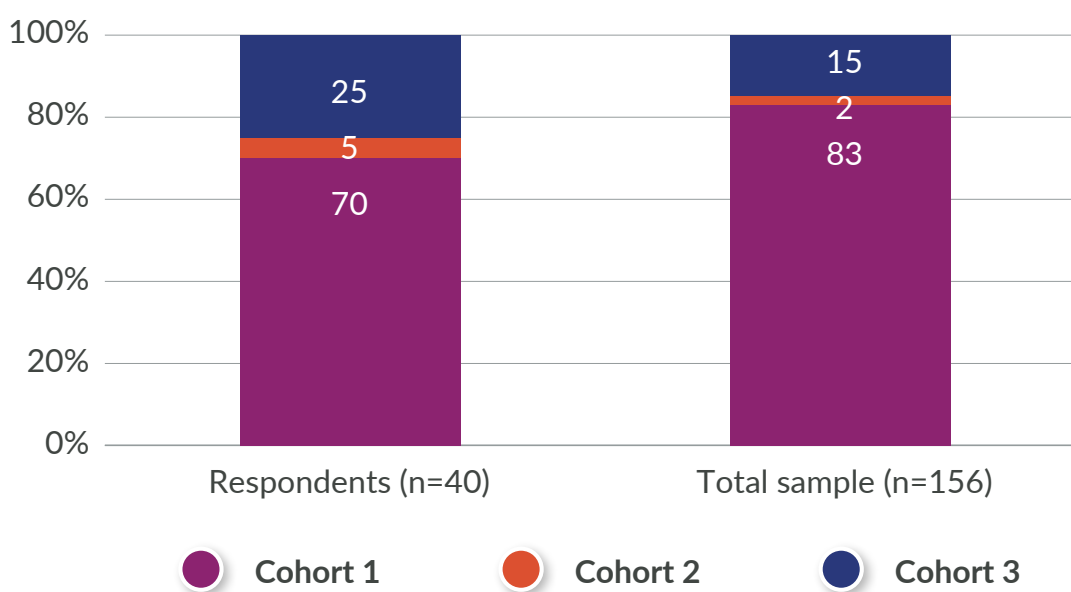
Whilst this question was included in surveys distributed to Cohort 3/4 only, a number of participants belonging to Cohort 1/2 (n = 716) referred to their experience of online learning in the additional comments of their respective surveys. A few comments highlighted how participants found the online learning platform easy to navigate (3%), that participants appreciated that they could work at their own pace (5%) and that there were opportunities for networking, peer learning and peer support afforded by the programme (17%). However, a few comments outlined how participants would prefer there to be an in-person element to the programme (2%) and further opportunities for peer engagement (2%).

Exit Survey

In order to gather a contrasting perspective on the appropriateness of the programme’s online asynchronous model of delivery, modes of learning, and course content, an exit survey was distributed to participants who had elected to withdraw from LINC+ between the period 27/04/2021 and 20/07/2022. As previously mentioned, 156 participants were invited to partake in the survey, and it received 40 responses.

At the time the exit survey was conducted there had been three intakes of participants to the LINC+ CPD Programme. The breakdown of survey respondents according to cohort membership is illustrated in Figure 10. This graph also depicts how the breakdown of participants according to cohort compares to the total pool of participants invited to partake in the survey. The majority of participants who had withdrawn from the programme belonged to Cohort 1.

Figure 10. Distribution of respondents according to cohort



Reason(s) for Withdrawal

Participants (n = 40) were asked to indicate their reason(s) for withdrawing from a list of potential options including personal circumstances; change of career goals; programme content and delivery; or were given the option if they preferred not to disclose that information. Participants could select more than one response if relevant. See Figure 11 below for the breakdown of participant responses.

Figure 11. Reason for withdrawal from programme

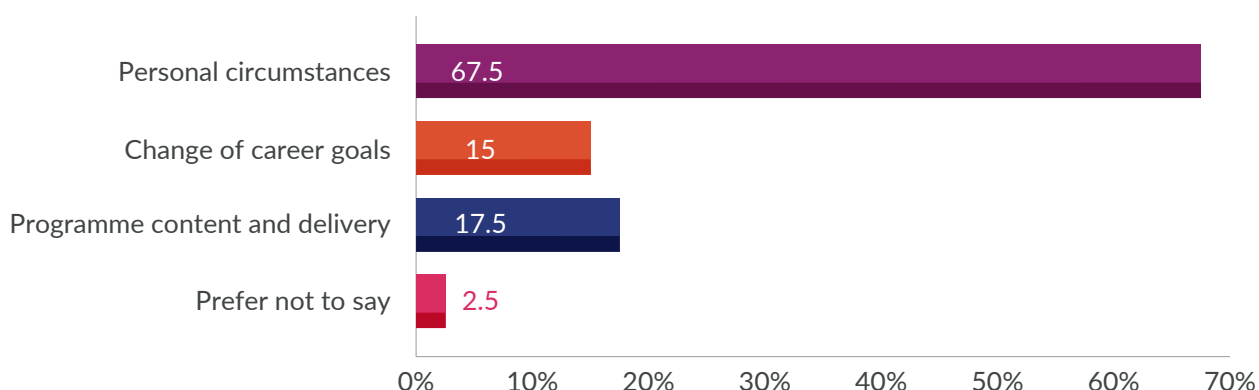


Table 8 below illustrates the breakdown of participant responses across each of the three cohorts. According to the findings, six out of seven participants (86%) who selected ‘programme content and delivery’ as a reason for withdrawing from the programme belonged to Cohort 1.

As previously outlined, amendments were made to the content and delivery of Packages 1 and 2 of the programme following feedback from the first and second cohorts. Subsequent to these alterations, the overall satisfaction ratings for Packages 1 and 2 rose from 78.3% and 83.2% to 96.7% and 95.4 %, respectively (see Chapter Three). Package 3 was developed in light of this feedback and achieved consistently high satisfaction ratings according to the evaluation surveys (94.6% and 98.0%).

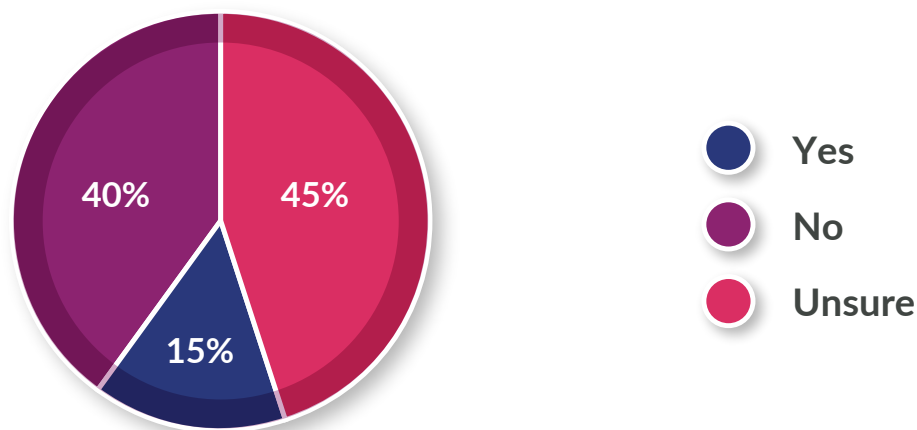
Table 8. Breakdown of participant reason(s) for withdrawal by cohort

	Personal circumstances	Change of career goals	Programme content & delivery	Prefer not to say
Cohort 1	64.3% (n = 18)	17.9% (n = 5)	21.4% (n = 6)	0.0% (n = 0)
Cohort 2	100.0% (n = 2)	0.0% (n = 0)	0.0% (n = 0)	0.0% (n = 0)
Cohort 3	70.0% (n = 7)	10.0% (n = 1)	10.0% (n = 1)	10.0% (n = 1)

Intention to Return

Participants were asked to indicate their intention to return to the programme in the future. Responses are illustrated below in Figure 12. A few participants (n = 6) indicated that it was their intention to return to the programme in the future.

Figure 12. Participants' intention to return to programme



Additional Comments

50% (20) of survey respondents provided additional comments on their experience of the LINC+ CPD Programme. These comments were analysed, and a number of themes were identified, discussed below.

Time Commitment

Almost half of participant comments (45%) made reference to the time commitment of participating in the LINC+ CPD Programme. A few participants expressed that the programme was “time consuming” (1), “very intensive” for a programme of self-paced professional learning (1), or that the programme “required more time and participation than I was willing to give” (1).

One participant outlined that although the content of the programme is excellent, the amount of time required to participate was too great alongside work and family obligations. Similarly, other participants cited lack of time due to family commitments (1), pressure related to maintaining a work-life balance (2), and the heavy burden of paperwork and administrative duties required in their role (2) as factors which contributed to their withdrawal from the programme.

Excellent course content but too much work for CPD from home when juggling work and family.

- Cohort 1 participant

Incentive to Participate

Relatedly, some participants (4) expressed a perceived lack of incentive to committing their personal time to the programme. One participant highlighted the fact that the programme is not accredited. Another participant felt that the overall purpose of the programme and its benefits, both to their service and to themselves personally, were unclear.

I didn't feel that there was a clear picture of where the CPD was going and the benefit to myself or my service.

- Cohort 1 participant

Two participants expressed that lack of financial incentive to participate contributed to their decision to withdraw from LINC+. One referred to the fact that participants are expected to engage with the programme in their own personal time with no monetary compensation. The other outlined how they feel their work is underappreciated in the sector and do not wish to engage in further professional learning programmes without remuneration.

I don't want to do any more CPD unless I'm getting paid for my time. I feel so undervalued with this new core funding and couldn't be bothered with more course work when I'm seeing no monetary gain.

- Cohort 1 participant

Programme Content and Delivery

As previously outlined, seven participants in total indicated that the content and delivery of the programme contributed to their decision to withdraw. A few of these participants elaborated that the content of the LINC+ CPD Programme is repetitive (2), uninteresting (1), too slow-paced (1), or that there was little new learning to be gained from participating in the programme (1). One participant who cited personal circumstances as their reason for withdrawal also expressed that the programme's content is uninteresting and unchallenging and would not contribute meaningfully to their professional advancement.

I loved the LINC course, but I thought the CPD was very very boring, it wasn't challenging and had nothing in it to further me professionally.

- Cohort 1 participant

On the other hand, of the six participants who cited 'change of career goals' as their reason for withdrawing from the programme, two commended the programme stating that it comprised "wonderful content" with "great support". One of these participants specified that they had left the ELC sector due to burnout.

Organisational Support

Finally, one participant highlighted how a lack of support from their setting's management in implementing the learning from LINC contributed to their decision to withdraw from the programme. This participant felt that financial factors were prioritised over enhancing the quality of inclusive provision in their setting.

The setting where I work doesn't ask or take into consideration any advice from me the LINC officer. I have said this to management before. We once had a sensory room for kids which I recommended and set up for the children but that was eventually gotten rid of when more funding was offered if you opened up a baby room. So hence the sensory room no longer exists within our setting which is a shame if we are suppose[d] to be all about diversity and inclusion for all going forward.

- Cohort 3 participant

Summary

Participant satisfaction across the various aspects of Packages 1 – 3 (e.g., content; application to practice; tutor support) was very high, with satisfaction rising in relation to Packages 1 and 2 between Cohorts 1/2 and Cohorts 3/4:

- Participant satisfaction across the various aspects of Package 1 rose from ranging between 74 – 84% according to Cohorts 1/2 to 85 – 96% according to Cohorts 3/4.
- Participant satisfaction across the various aspects of Package 2 rose from ranging between 81 – 86% according to Cohorts 1/2 to 84 – 100% according to Cohorts 3/4.
- Participant satisfaction across the various aspects of Package 3 was similar across Cohorts 1/2 and Cohorts 3/4, ranging between 81 – 96% and 82 – 98%, respectively

It is important to note that whilst satisfaction with the difficulty of the packages was lower, participants generally reported feeling ‘neutral’ about this aspect of the programme, indicating they were not necessarily dissatisfied. A similar trend was observed in the LINC Level 6 Programme module evaluation surveys, prompting the later inclusion of a qualitative question to explore any challenges participants faced in more detail (LINC Consortium, in preparation). Future iterations of the LINC+ package evaluation surveys may benefit from incorporating a similar question to better identify areas where participants need additional support and to understand this statistic in greater detail.

Across Packages 1 – 3, almost all participants reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with the programme’s online model of delivery:

- 96% were satisfied/very satisfied with the fully online mode of learning.
- 97% were satisfied/very satisfied with the asynchronous mode of learning.
- 94% were satisfied/very satisfied with the look, feel and navigability of the online lessons.

Findings from the exit survey indicated that almost all respondents who withdrew from the programme and cited ‘programme content and delivery’ as the reason for withdrawing belonged to the first cohort of LINC+ participants. As previously outlined, amendments were made to the content and delivery of Packages 1 and 2 following feedback from the first and second cohorts which resulted in increases in satisfaction ratings across all aspects of these packages.

Chapter Five: Communities of Practice for LINC+ Participants



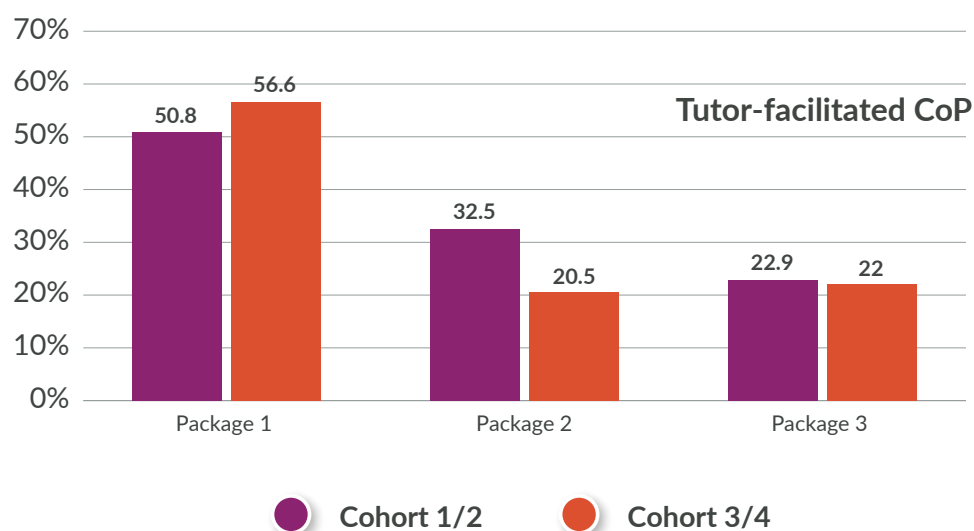
Communities of Practice for LINC+ Participants

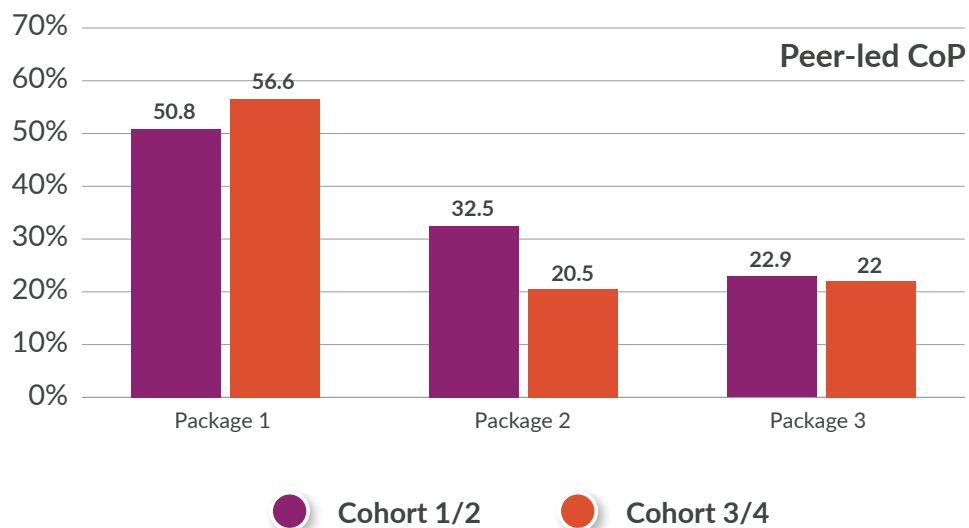
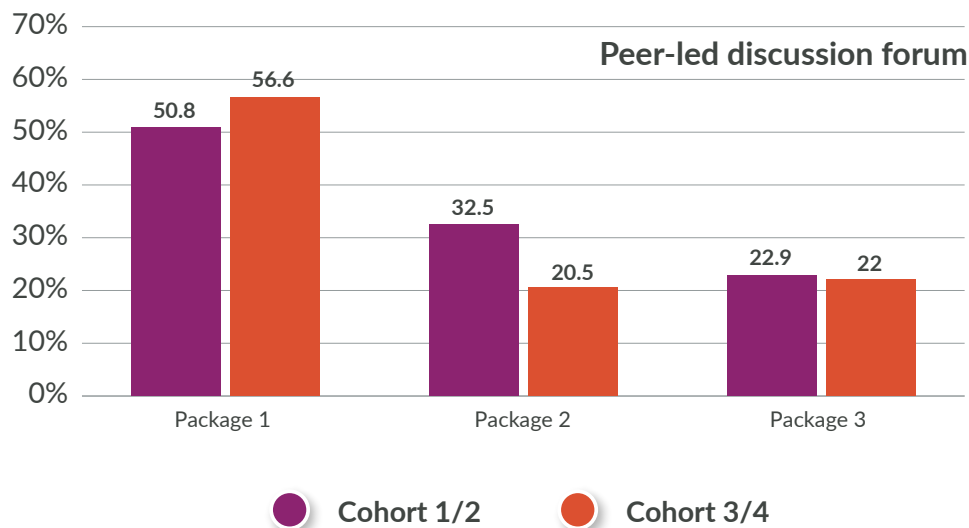
Another aim of the present evaluation was to investigate the extent to which the LINC+ CPD Programme enabled the development of Communities of Practice (CoPs) amongst participants, the models of CoPs formed, the barriers and facilitators to forming and sustaining CoPs, and the contributions made to the enhancement of inclusion in early learning and care (ELC) settings through peer engagement and peer learning.

To support participants in developing the skills and relationships to establish their own CoPs, each package of the LINC+ CPD Programme hosted a tutor-facilitated CoP session. A schedule of sessions and topics to be discussed was disseminated to participants within each package and participants could opt-in to sessions they were interested in attending. Additionally, LINC+ provides a facility for participants to engage in peer-led CoP sessions with one another using the BigBlueButton (2025) technology. A discussion forum was also available for participants to discuss relevant topics and organise their virtual peer-led CoP groups and sessions. Both the peer-led facility and discussion forum were self-directed CoP spaces. All CoP activities were optional, and participants could choose to engage in as many or as few of these LINC+ features as they wished.

As part of the online survey evaluations, participants were asked to indicate whether they engaged with a tutor-facilitated CoP session, with the peer-led CoP discussion forum, and the peer-led CoP facility. The proportions of respondents who reported engaging with each of these facilities across Package 1 – 3 are illustrated below in Figure 13.

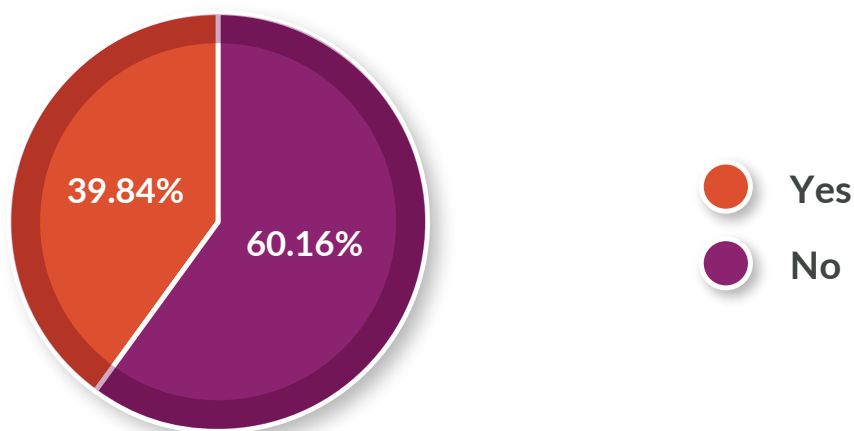
Figure 13. Proportion of respondents who engaged with CoP facilities





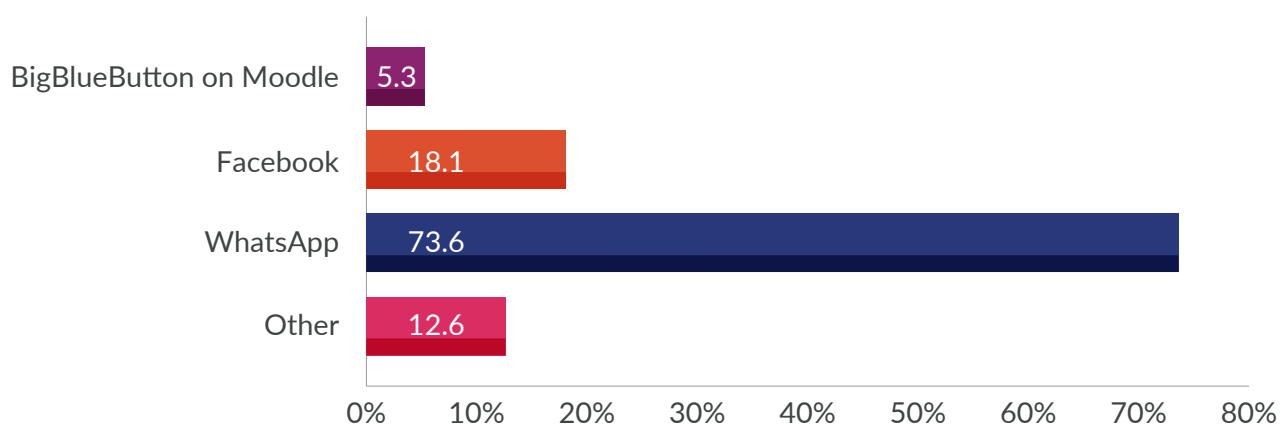
From the findings presented above, engagement with the optional CoP elements of the programme appears to have reduced as participants worked through the packages, perhaps indicating that participants were forming their own CoPs with their peers and were requiring less support in this regard. Subsequently, participants were asked to indicate whether they had joined or formed their own CoP with other LINC+ participants from their engagement with the programme. Participant responses were averaged across the Package 1, 2 and 3 surveys. According to the findings, 39.8% of participants indicated that they had formed or joined their own CoP with other LINC+ participants (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Participants who joined/formed own CoP from engagement with LINC+



Participants who reported forming/joining a CoP with other INclusion COordinators (INCOs) were asked to indicate what forum(s) they have used. The results are illustrated in Figure 15. Please note that participants could select more than one response. According to the findings, the majority of respondents reported using WhatsApp (2025) to interact with their CoP. Participants who selected 'other' elaborated that they had in-person meetings with their CoP (14%), communicated over the phone (5%), via email (2%), Zoom (3%), Microsoft Teams (2%), or that the CoP was based within the respondent's workplace (8%). A number of comments (20%) specified that participants were already engaging in CoPs with other practitioners/ relevant professionals prior to commencing the LINC+ CPD Programme.

Figure 15. Fora participants used for their CoPs



Participants were also asked to elaborate on the factors which hindered or enabled the formation of CoPs with other INCOs. Please note, this question was included in the surveys distributed to Cohorts 3/4 only. Over half of comments (53%) referred to time constraints hindering participants in forming or engaging with a CoP. Participants referred to their work responsibilities, family commitments and time already dedicated to engaging with the content of the LINC+ CPD Programme. Another participant referred to the changes in the ELC sector (e.g., core funding) which they felt left little energy for engaging with a CoP. A number of participants (4%) expressed personal circumstances prevented them from engaging with a CoP.

Lack of time - I've a small service of which I am owner/manager/leader and there is so much work to do after the service ends, I barely have time for the course.

Apart from the issue of time, participant comments variously highlighted a number of additional factors which hindered them in forming or joining a CoP. For instance, one participant commented that competition between services in their locality prevented them from reaching out to other settings whilst another participant suggested that local services might not be willing to share experiences openly with each other for this reason. Another participant commented that not being the owner of their setting hindered them in forming a CoP, perhaps indicating a lack of support in their setting in fully realising the leadership aspect of the INCO role.

One participant expressed that more support and encouragement in forming groups for peer-led CoPs should be provided. Another expressed that a lack of familiarity with the BigBlueButton (2025) technology hindered them in forming a CoP. Similar sentiments were highlighted by a few participants (2%) belonging to Cohort 1/2 when asked to list three aspects they would change about the packages of LINC+ (see Appendix G).

A few comments highlighted several factors which have facilitated the formation of peer-led CoPs, including how digital technologies such as WhatsApp (2025) and the Moodle discussion forum (MIC 2025) enabled LINC+ participants to have initial discussions when forming their CoPs; the openness and willingness of other services to engage with one another; and the common experience of having completed the LINC Programme together.

Time but technology makes it easier to communicate and having undertaken the LINC programme together it was easy to start a CoP together.

Finally, some comments (18%) expressed that whilst participants had not engaged with a CoP to date, they intended to do so in the near future. Other comments (7%) referred to the fact that participants were already a member of a CoP (e.g., with colleagues; local services; previous college class; groups on social media).

I feel where my service is located there is a certain amount of competition that will hinder me setting up a COP. However, I am going to give it a shot as this course has taught me about the benefits COP can bring to my service and other services.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups have been conducted to date in order to explore LINC+ participants' experiences of CoPs in greater detail. Focus Group 1 comprised five participants, none of whom were currently engaged in a CoP with other LINC+ participants. Focus Group 2 comprised three participants each of whom was currently engaged in a WhatsApp-based CoP (WhatsApp 2025) with other LINC+ participants. Participants discussed the potential and actualised benefits of CoPs to their practice and expressed a desire to engage more fully in a peer-led CoP with other INCOs. They also made suggestions for better harnessing the potential of CoPs among LINC graduates, with a particular focus on incorporating in-person meetings into the CoP model. A number of themes and sub-themes were identified from participants' discussions using a thematic analysis of the data, elaborated below.

Theme 1: CoP Model of Professional Learning

Participants discussed the development of their CoPs and the ways in which learning within this context differs to learning acquired through more formalised programmes of professional learning.

Subtheme: Developing CoPs

Participants in Focus Group 2 discussed several factors which enabled the development of their CoPs with other LINC+ participants. Participants felt that Package 1 of LINC+ established the principles of CoPs for INCOs which facilitated the smooth development of their peer-led CoPs.

What's nice having done the training or about the structure of it, is that you know there hasn't been any, and I don't mean to say problems, but let's say everybody kind of knows what it is or isn't to be used for. It's really just if someone has a question, they'll pose it in there and then different opinions or different ideas come back.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

An openness among members to share and contribute to the group was also highlighted. It was suggested that this baseline of trust to share so freely may be related to having the commonality of participating in the LINC Level 6 Programme together, during which time a shared understanding of the principles of inclusion developed among students. Having a shared language for how to talk about inclusion among participants was important to maintaining a functioning and productive CoP. The literature (e.g., Cherrington and Thornton 2015) has previously demonstrated that this establishment of relational trust is integral to developing successful CoPs.

People were very generous about what they were sharing, which made it really interesting and worthwhile too. And I suppose you knew everybody on that group had done the LINC course...there was a formal understanding of what being inclusive meant. I think that probably made it more successful than if it was just getting a group of people in a certain area that worked in preschools together...So you can kind of refer back to those same those principles which I think is helpful.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

Subtheme: Application to Practice

Participants emphasised how the content discussed in CoPs is often more practical and grounded in the everyday realities of working early childhood teachers compared to more traditional models of professional learning. The ongoing sharing of practice facilitates members in applying their learning to their own practice and supports them in their role.

Often the content or what's discussed or what's shared is more real for us on a day-to-day basis than what we learn when in a more formalised kind of learning environment when we're training or on a course, but I think we're sharing real experiences and on a day-to-day basis and that's hugely supportive.

- Participant 1, Focus Group 1

The process of discussing and sharing ideas within the context of a CoP also helps members to link theory with practice. For LINC+ participants, this process provides insight into the myriad ways early childhood teachers have transformed the theory and principles of inclusion into their day-to-day practices.

It helps to put theory into practice, because then you have practical examples of how people have been inclusive or adapted their settings or different things, and then you kind of go “OK well, yeah so here’s something else that I could try”.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

Subtheme: Interactive Process

Participants also discussed how learning within a CoP is a more interactive process compared to traditional models of professional learning. Furthermore, the idea of the ‘expert’ becomes more distributed within CoPs and learners may be more confident in sharing their own perspectives and seeking clarification.

I would find the more formalised programs is more you’re spoken to; it’s delivered to you from a person or an individual in an area of expertise and they’re sharing their research, knowledge or whatever. Whereas the CoP is a more interactive process. And I think I’d actually feel more confident...I mean, they both have their domain and I totally respect that, but for me the community of practice, I felt more that I could contribute to the process, that I just wasn’t having to take in information all the time, that I was able to question and sort of clarify and share from my perspective as well.

- Participant 2, Focus Group 1

When participants’ ideas and perspectives are validated and taken on by other CoP members this can also provide a boost in confidence and motivation. This may be particularly salient for professionals working in the ELC sector, who often feel undervalued.

I found that with the Communities of Practice, you know, I have my own strengths and weaknesses, but I was able to answer a few questions there and give advice on certain topics. And then whoever put the question up, they said it was a great idea and worked really well and that gave me a boost of confidence as well, like, “oh, I’m doing something right”. So that interaction and the fact that someone is actually taking up your ideas and they’re working is actually telling you that you’re doing a great job.

- Participant 3, Focus Group 1

Theme 2: Value of CoPs to LINC Graduates

Participants discussed the value of CoP, as a forum for peer-learning and support, for enhancing participants' well-being, for improving quality in settings for the benefit of children and families, and the impact of CoPs within the wider sectoral context in which LINC graduates perform their role.

Sub-theme: Peer Learning and Support

Participants discussed the value of CoPs as a space to share ideas and to give and receive advice. Given the volume of knowledge that exists already within the sector, CoPs provide a forum where members can share this learning and in turn enhance quality in settings. Exchanging best practices with peers, discussing challenges, and keeping abreast of the latest developments in the sector advances professional growth and encourages a culture of continuous learning.

It's a really good space to share ideas to, to gain advice and support from peers in the same position, because that's the one thing we know is that we've all been there, done that or might have a strategy or some support that we might be able to give.

- Participant 4, Focus Group 1

The phrase "a fresh pair of eyes" was repeated multiple times in both focus groups with regards to the potential of discussing problems with community members from different settings to provide a new lens through which to view challenges and CoPs as fora for joint problem-solving and developing solutions.

Sometimes when you're in a room everyday it can be difficult. And if you have children with high needs in the class and you can tell that the staff are struggling, sometimes listening to somebody else or having a chance to talk about it just gives you a new idea or almost fresh eyes on something, even though they haven't come to your setting. But it just might make you think "oh yeah, maybe I should try this?"

- Participant 8, Focus Group 2

CoPs were also referred to as a supportive space to talk through challenges in the sector. One participant described being a member of a CoP as like having a “safety net” which also ensures access to important information or developments in the sector. Participants also discussed topics that would be particularly salient for a CoP among INCOs. This included keeping up to date on new legislation and resources related to inclusion, providing support to one another with the challenges of the role, sharing ideas on how to get other staff members on the same page as regards to inclusion, sharing strategies and experiences on how to talk to parents about AIM, and as a space to discuss the learning from the packages of the LINC+ CPD Programme.

They're in the background and there as a kind of a safety net or just even a sounding board, you'll go to it and put something up or, you know, if there's something happening in the area and you think "oh God, I wonder does everyone know this, I'll let them know that that's going on", that's the way we use it.

- Participant 6, Focus Group 2

Having a network to seek advice, particularly in relation to inclusion, was identified as a gap for participants in Focus Group 1 who were not actively engaged in a CoP with other INCOs.

I definitely think it's a huge gap at the moment for me in my role. For instance, in my day-to-day work with the team if I need support, I reach out to my Early Years Specialist because we would have quite a number of children accessing AIM, and hopefully we're getting the quality development service to support us. That's how I try and get the ideas, get advice and support but really the CoP would be brilliant, and I'd participate.

- Participant 2, Focus Group 1

In a sector which is demanding of professionals' time, participants also discussed how sharing proven solutions within CoPs can save time and effort. Participants referred to sharing templates, resources, ideas for the setting's environment which have passed Tusla inspections in other services, strategies for discussing AIM with parents, and previous experiences of filling in AIM applications. Sharing proven solutions or advice from those with more experience can allow professionals to direct more time and energy to the children themselves.

I suppose I've used it for helping other people as well. A lot of people would say "well would you know this?" and it might be something that you knew and you share it with them or you might have a template and you'll share it with them, to save the person so much bother looking up something else or going the wrong route about it or saying, "well, I actually rang this place and got this information and we use it that way" to help each other and to support each other in our daily roles as well.

- Participant 6, Focus Group 2

In relation to saving time, participants also discussed the mode of sharing information. For instance, sharing photographs from the setting's environment is a quick approach to conveying ideas which can be easily understood.

It's so quick to get learning from a photograph I thought as well, which was what made the WhatsApps work and really handy.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

Subtheme: Feeling of Belonging

Further to the information and learning members of a CoP share, participants in both focus groups referred to the importance of belonging to a community of like-minded individuals. Participants outlined how sharing experiences can reduce feelings of isolation and provide relief that they are not alone in the challenges they face. Both focus groups also discussed how such feelings of isolation can be particularly pronounced for owner/managers whose role comes with unique challenges and that CoP membership helps alleviate this due to a shared understanding between members of the hardships of the role.

The Communities of Practice are great and there's so much valuable information that you can get from other people that are in the same situation as you, at different times, in different settings from different locations and it's great to share ideas and to hear that sometimes you're not alone in what you're going through.

- Participant 3, Focus Group 1

Subtheme: Expanding the Application of CoPs

Participants in Focus Group 1, who were not currently involved in a CoP with other LINC+ participants, gave examples of other ways in which they have incorporated the concept of CoPs into their practice. For instance, participants discussed adapting what they have learned about CoPs to shape how they run their staff meetings. One participant reflected on how this process has permitted their staff to share ideas and bring their own strengths and interests to the fore. This is reminiscent of one of the elements of the LINC Competency Framework, under the pillar of inclusive practice, which states that the expertise of staff is utilised.

It's incredible when you take them out of the rooms and make it a bit more relaxed and the amount of sharing and ideas that can come through that is wonderful. Like when we talk about the whole child, we have to talk about the whole adult...they bring in immense ideas with them...So I took that from one of my CoP experiences that actually the whole adult, think about their strengths, think about their interests.

- Participant 2, Focus Group 1

Sharing the learning from the LINC+ CPD Programme in meetings with staff was also reported to have enhanced colleagues' development, to the benefit of the setting and children.

I've got the confidence from doing the course, doing the LINC training and then all I'm learning from the CPD following up on to that and you know sharing it with them, but they have learned by doing, they've built on it you know and everyone benefits - they're benefiting and of course the children are benefiting and I'm benefiting because they're taking on more responsibility. They're taking things in a new and more developed direction, you know, and so suppose that's how I've benefited from it.

- Participant 1, Focus Group 1

Another participant described developing a CoP for parents attending their setting as a space to provide support to one another as well as organising a CoP between staff in the two settings they own/manage, elaborating on how this approach has generated new ideas and ways of working for both teams.

When I was reflecting on my engagements [with] the CoP, I was like, this could be created within my two settings because they both deal with things internally and then I'm the link, and I was like, why don't they link? Even going into the different dynamic of a different centre for fresh ideas to hash out queries between them and they actually ask for the group meetings more because they feel like there's more learning, there's more heads there. Issues get solved faster and more ideas.

- Participant 5, Focus Group 1

Sub-theme: Need for CoPs for INCOs in Sector

Participants also discussed the broader context in which LINC graduates work, suggesting that a prerequisite to successful CoPs among INCOs is that wider factors which impact LINC graduates in performing their role are acknowledged and addressed. For instance, one participant outlined how setting closures in their locality makes it difficult to build local networks among early childhood teachers. However, given the current landscape of the ELC sector in Ireland in which administrative burdens and staff shortages are among challenges facing settings, developing support networks among early childhood teachers is viewed as highly valuable.

Three preschools have closed down in my area in the last two years, so I suppose it's making it more difficult to network...I mean I do value it hugely and I think it's the way things are now with all the new challenges we have, I think it's something we're going to need more and more.

- Participant 1, Focus Group 1

Another participant felt a CoP among INCOs could support the establishment of a collective agenda for advocating for better conditions in the sector and in bringing issues which affect the implementation of inclusive practices to policymakers. For example, the issue of staff shortages and how funding schemes can lead to staff turnover of professionals working for the inclusion of children in ELC settings.

A lot of our AIM workers are being nicked by primary schools because a lot of them might have an SNA module within their level 5 or an advanced level 6 certificate and it is those kinds of really well-trained childcare workers are a real addition to any primary school. It's a very well-paid position. I've been trying to fill an AIM position since Christmas, I'd love to know is this something that's countrywide? Is it something that we all need to come together as LINC COordinators and say to government?

- Participant 4, Focus Group 1

Theme 3: Online vs. In-Person CoPs

A desire for some form of in-person interaction with other LINC+ participants was evident from the focus group discussions. A number of sub-themes were identified to frame this discussion, elaborated below.

Sub-theme: Forging Initial Connections

Participants in Focus Groups 1 and 2 discussed that, as both groups encountered challenges in getting the synchronous peer-led CoPs off the ground, an initial in-person meet-up could help bridge this gap and allow future online interactions to flourish. For instance, one participant had met other LINC+ participants at an in-person meeting with their County Childcare Committee and had launched their WhatsApp-based CoP (WhatsApp 2025) through this initial in-person connection. It was also suggested that the confidence to actively participate and share ideas and perspectives in an online CoP could be developed in the context of initial in-person meetings. This might also be the context in which the expectations and ways of working for the CoP are established.

It's nice to have met the person first in-person, and you make more of a connection I think...People share things out at the table more freely than they do online. I just feel that maybe once it was set up then it will move online quite seamlessly and then work away at that...Then it could be something like laying down the ground rules and what's expected and what you know, kind of formalising it and then moving on from that.

- Participant 6, Focus Group 2

There was a consensus among participants that CoP members can only truly get to know each other during in-person meet-ups. Forging these connections in person may also increase participants' motivation to continue engaging with their CoP as, once they know each other, they do not want to "let them down" by not attending.

If there's initial groups there established, you can kind of bring people in a bit quicker and if you've met the person, you kind of go well, I'm not going to let them down, I will show up.

- Participant 5, Focus Group 1

A participant located in a rural region of Ireland expressed that they would also be keen to attend meetups in person to forge initial connections with other LINC+ participants, particularly as they weren't aware of any working locally to them.

I'm down the country. I suppose it would be nice to link in with, you know, if you were meeting face-to-face to link in with, I don't know. I'm sure they're out there. I just don't know any other INCOs. I don't.

- Participant 1, Focus Group 1

An idea similar to in-service days for primary school teachers was suggested for INclusion COordinators (INCOs) to dedicate to peer-learning and engagement. This would not only allow for CoPs to develop naturally and in person but also contribute to the recognition of the important role INCOs play in the lives of children and the significant time early childhood teachers dedicate to engaging in professional learning.

I think if we developed a day that we could all come together...that actually wasn't taken into our personal time because what we're learning is as vital, like, when primary school teachers have their in-service days, their learning is really vital...I would love that to be the goal to have, like, two days a year. I'm not saying loads because I don't want to put pressure on families. I know they rely on us, but I think two days a year for us to actually physically develop proper Communities of Practice face-to-face.

- Participant 5, Focus Group 1

Sub-theme: Blended CoPs

Whilst all participants agreed that there should be some in-person element built into the LINC+ CoPs, a few explicitly recognised the value of online interactions. Online meetings can equally facilitate peer support and the sharing of knowledge, strategies and ideas. Furthermore, online communication can facilitate interactions with people regardless of geographical location. This may be relevant to concerns raised by survey respondents regarding competition between local services hindering the formation of CoPs in their area.

But I can see the necessity for the online...It is a great way of supporting you with your problems and difficulties that you're having, and also, it's a great way to share stuff that you've come across.

- Participant 2, Focus Group 1

It was also suggested, however, that more than just for the purposes of making initial connects, in-person meet-ups should regularly be incorporated into the peer-led CoPs alongside online interactions.

I do think you develop a better rapport getting to meet someone, like, shake their hand and be, like, “hiya I’m [Participant005], pleased to meet you”. I think that a balance, one for accessibility to have the online platform, but maybe even every third one to maybe be a face-to-face.

- Participant 5, Focus Group 1

All participants who took part in the focus groups had undertaken the LINC Programme prior to March 2020 and therefore had experience of attending in-person Saturday classes as part of each programme module. Many referred to how important the Saturday classes were as part of a programme that is delivered primarily asynchronously, both as a context for peer-learning and for social interaction with peers. The social aspect of engaging with a CoP was also important to focus group participants and this was referred to in the context of meeting up in-person. Participants agreed that meeting in-person has diminished since the COVID-19 pandemic but is a vital part of human connection.

I used to love them Saturdays to go in and just ask for advice from people. And you had the whole Saturday, you had a bit of lunch there, a cup of tea, cup of coffee and then you’ll be having chats...face-to-face is being kind of lost with COVID but it’s so valuable and it’s so much information you can get from there. It’s unreal. And like that the social part of it as well. Like, I don’t get to go out much. It’s great.

- Participant 3, Focus Group 1

For those working alone with limited peer support, the in-person connection with peers is vitally important, to not only their work, but also their wellbeing.

If you are a manager, you’re on your own and you just really, really appreciate it. Just being in a room with other people with similar interests or that just understand you and the support behind that, even if no one says a word and you just have a cup of coffee. Most people who want to talk to you, it’s either a problem, it’s compliance and you’re filling out a form...so it is really lovely to have somebody who you don’t have to explain what you do, they get it and they’re there, you feel straight away, you feel supported.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

Sub-theme: Navigating Online Learning Platforms

A few participants linked their uncertainty with where to start in forming the peer-led CoPs with challenges utilising the dedicated BigBlueButton (2025) space on Moodle (MIC 2025). One participant elaborated that the navigation of the online platform for the peer-led CoPs was unclear, and this was an impediment to forming the CoPs. A further impediment was that participants were unsure of how to take the first steps in bringing a group of LINC+ participants together for the purpose of establishing a CoP. Participants felt that more support with the technology aspect of forming CoPs needs to be embedded in LINC+.

I'm pretty OK on computers, and I tried to see what way do I link into the Community of Practice on the latest round of the LINC CPD and I found that I couldn't figure out where I was supposed to go with it, how I was supposed to do it. Do I start it off and hope somebody joins in? How does it work? I found that really difficult and the one thing that I have to say, it has to be very user friendly to work because we are all too busy.

- Participant 4, Focus Group 1

Sub-theme: Asynchronous Engagement

Participants in Focus Group 2 were each currently involved in a CoP with LINC+ participants using WhatsApp (2025). They referred to the benefits of this model, such as convenience, ability to interact in your own time, and to ask questions, gain advice, and share ideas. One participant elaborated that this platform enables members to share photographs and images which particularly suits their own style of learning.

I suppose, yeah, it's nice to see, you know, visually. I'm a real visual learner and it's nice to see visually the way people have things laid out in the rooms and, you know, things like that.

- Participant 6, Focus Group 2

Whilst acknowledging the value of the instantaneous correspondences using this platform, Participant 7 acknowledged that it felt 'very virtual'. Another participant felt the types of interactions facilitated on this platform were not the same as those you would have in-person or during synchronous online meet-ups.

It's really just text messaging. It's not the same type of interaction that you would have if you were meeting up even virtually...or meeting up face-to-face...It's very convenient and it's great to be able to get the answers back sometimes very quickly from people and solutions and it's good but I do feel we're losing a lot of the face-to-face.

- Participant 8, Focus Group 2

Participants in Focus Group 1 on the other hand suggested that a dedicated LINC+ forum similar to WhatsApp (2025) would be beneficial alongside synchronous meet-ups. The discussion on this topic suggested that the dedicated peer-led discussion forum on the online learning platform for LINC+ participants was not being fully utilised and that perhaps this resource needs to be better signposted. Participants felt such a space would be ideal for posing questions as they arise, engaging when time permits, and signalling potential topics for synchronous sessions.

So I think that maybe if there was forum chats that could be logged into that you could put up a query and then check at the end of the week if there's something so that if it's on your head, you can put it down... so I think the instantaneousness of a forum and then the continuity of an actual meeting that you get to hash it out.

- Participant 5, Focus Group 1

It was also suggested that, whilst it was beneficial that the groups for the synchronous CoP sessions were organised by geographical location, a discussion forum should be open to everyone regardless of location. All LINC+ participants should have access to the same information and bringing together INCOs in this way could be powerful in developing agendas for advocating for their role and the ELC sector.

I think what LINC did in a way was really good, and in a way it was really bad, and that was, it set up communities of practice in different areas and what that means is, it might be important in certain areas for certain topics...I think it needs a layered approach so that whatever is happening that everybody gets access to everybody else...There's an advocacy piece that could be within that piece as well as peer support.

- Participant 4, Focus Group 1

Finally, one participant expressed an awareness of the dedicated LINC+ peer-led discussion forum but indicated they were hesitant to use it as they, and others they knew, did not want colleagues in their setting who were also enrolled on the programme to see their posts in case this had any repercussions in the workplace. This participant suggested the option to post anonymously might be useful.

I found it a bit hard actually asking for advice in certain situations because my manager is doing this course as well and I didn't feel comfortable in putting up something. So maybe an anonymous, you know when you can post online, and you can do it in an anonymous kind of way...And I know other INCOs that are in the same situation as I was with managers and they don't feel comfortable in asking the questions there.

- Participant 3, Focus Group 1

Theme 4: CoP Structure and Support

Participants discussed the need for further support with structuring and developing the peer-led CoPs in their initial stages. The challenges encountered by participants in addition to their suggestions are outlined in the sub-themes below.

Sub-theme: Establishing Roles and Processes

Participants referred to a disconnect between what they had learned in Package 1 of the LINC+ CPD Programme about the different roles of a CoP and their experiences within their CoPs. Participants in Focus Group 2 felt their WhatsApp groups (WhatsApp 2025) with other LINC+ participants were not formal CoPs because they had not gone through the process of establishing roles and ground rules for the group.

If you follow what you would have described during the LINC+ course that everybody's given a formal role or whatever, like, we wouldn't have done any of that.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

Several participants from Focus Group 1, who were not currently involved in a CoP with other INCOs, discussed how they had met up a small number of times with other LINC+ participants, organised via the online discussion forum on the LINC+ learning platform, with the view of developing a CoP. Participants felt these initial meet-ups failed to take off and become a regular occurrence due to a lack of structure as regards topics for discussion and the establishment of roles within the CoP. They felt that more support with deciding or establishing a process for deciding roles and topics would be helpful.

We did try the CoP by the LINC...but we struggled, I don't know, you need I think more assistance in structuring it and sort of say "so who takes the leadership role and what are the topics we're going to explore?". It needs a little bit more structure and I feel we need a little bit more support...but the CoP would be brilliant, and I'd participate.

- Participant 2, Focus Group 1

This was echoed in Focus Group 2, where participants discussed how initial guidance in establishing how to select and run through a topic and developing goals for the CoP could help propel the peer-led CoPs forward.

I think if you if you got to run through one topic, you kind of know, OK, this is how you would run it. And then even I suppose the next thing, how do you arrive at selecting a topic within a group...And I suppose if the group itself then decide right well we're going to at least do 4 topics a year or something like that, you know that you have a realistic target...if the group commits to it, then that could be something that if the group achieves something, then it feels worthwhile to commit more time to it.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

Sub-theme: Respect for Time Commitment

Participants discussed that more structure and support with the CoP process is crucial given that early childhood teachers, whilst willing and eager to take part in CoPs, are committing their personal time to professional learning. Participants therefore want to be assured that when they commit their time that they gain something from partaking.

I won't be wasting my precious time, that I'll step into something that is gonna harness us, guide us, and support us. So, whether there's COPs that have predetermined topics that they're gonna explore or stuff like that. That there's more clarity and structure for me so that I know what I'm coming in to and hopefully what I will get out of it.

- Participant 2, Focus Group 1

This might be achieved by providing support with establishing an agenda and the roles and topics to be discussed, so that participants can go into the session knowing they will gain a new strategy, piece of knowledge, skill etc.

So then they kind of go, “OK, well, I’m going to get that strategy or someone’s going to explain this strategy to me”...a topic that people go “OK well that’ll be interesting, I’ll do that,” like, and it kicks it off...so that if they’re giving up their time you’re coming away with either a new skill or some little kind of extra thing. So, then you can go “OK, I can justify given that I’m also going to meet some people” and that helps get it going.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

Sub-theme: Timing of Interactions

Participants shared ideas on what frequency of interactions within a peer-led CoP would be appropriate. Some participants felt that monthly meetings would help establish the trust between members, which is crucial for the functioning of a CoP.

I think that a month to six weeks for a meet-up because you need regular interaction for relationships to be built, for trust to be established, for rapport and to feel like colleagues.

- Participant 5, Focus Group 1

Again, participants referred to the LINC Saturday classes and suggested a similar schedule could work for in-person CoPs. Dedicating a weekend day to a meet-up may also alleviate an issue raised by one participant that in the evening after work people are often tired and it is challenging to engage in meaningful discussion and learning.

If you block off a Saturday, nobody can interfere with that time. You can properly connect to the people, which I think for LINC+, there was just so much wonderful information there, but it would have been nice to have a Saturday together somewhere where people help you reflect, take it in and it kind of embeds it a bit more with you.

- Participant 7, Focus Group 2

Participants also felt it was important to set out realistic goals for meetups given the work and time commitment involved and suggested that meeting up every few months would not put too much pressure on CoP members.

I do think it is so important and, even if it is only about having maybe three or four topics over a year. So, it’s not that people are having to meet on a weekly basis. It doesn’t even have to be monthly, but every couple of months. I think it would be lovely to be able to get together and have a chat, have a topic that can be discussed.

- Participant 8, Focus Group 2

It was also expressed that it can be difficult to coordinate peer-led sessions given the asynchronous delivery of the LINC+ CPD Programme meaning that participants are not engaging at the same time and are engaging in different packages. It was suggested that predefined dates and topics for the peer-led CoP could help bring together LINC+ participants and give them time to prepare and develop ideas for each session.

I think it may be because there's gaps between the programmes that we're doing...I think maybe if there was even structured dates to keep the continuity. So that then when we finish this it will just become a norm that on the 25th of every month or every second month we all meet up on this platform and if there's any ideas, we can put it in the week before so we can do a bit of research on it. Something like that.

- Participant 5, Focus Group 1

Summary

Between 22 – 57% of participants reported engaging in the tutor-facilitated CoP sessions across Packages 1 – 3. Across Packages 1 – 3, engagement with the peer-led discussion forum and the peer-led CoP facility ranged from 26 – 50% and 11 – 28%, respectively. Approximately 40% of participants indicated that they had formed or joined their own CoP with other LINC+ participants, with the majority of those participants using WhatsApp (2025) to engage with their CoP. The most commonly cited reason for not participating in a CoP was a lack of time.

Focus group discussions with LINC+ participants highlighted a strong desire for greater engagement in CoPs with fellow LINC graduates. Focus group participants expressed an interest in sharing practical examples, exchanging ideas and knowledge, offering and receiving advice, gaining peer support, and fostering a sense of belonging within a community of like-minded professionals. Participants emphasised the value of in-person meetings in establishing successful CoPs and expressed a need for additional support in structuring CoP meetings and using the dedicated LINC+ technology as the CoPs transition to online platforms.

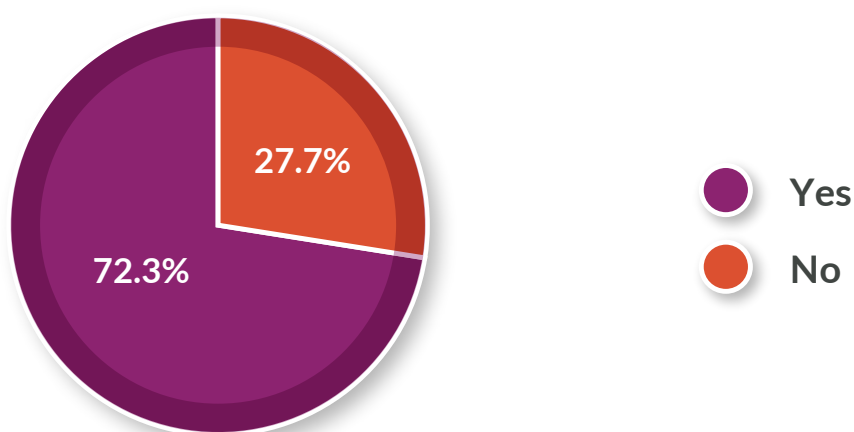
Chapter Six: Participants' Learning and Professional Development



Participants' Learning and Professional Development

A key measure of the impact of the LINC+ CPD Programme is the extent to which graduates have developed their competence in their role as INclusion COordinator (INCO) through their engagement with the programme. As previously mentioned, however, not all participants on the LINC+ CPD Programme are the designated INCO in their setting. As part of the online survey evaluations, participants were asked to indicate if they were currently the appointed INCO in their setting. Please note, this question was included in the surveys distributed to Cohorts 3/4 only and that participant responses were averaged across the Package 1, 2 and 3 survey evaluations (n = 216). The proportion of respondents who indicated that they were currently the appointed INCO in their setting ranged from 63.2% – 87.1% across the three package surveys, with an average of 72.3% (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Average proportion of appointed INCOs



Participants who reported they were not the appointed INCO were invited to elaborate on their response. The majority of responses indicated that multiple members of staff in the respondents' settings had undertaken the LINC programme and that a colleague (26%) or manager (33%) was currently the appointed INCO. A few comments (11%) did, however, specify that whilst the respondent was not the appointed INCO, inclusion-related responsibilities are shared amongst the team in their settings.

One respondent outlined that their manager has not raised the issue of appointing an INCO whilst a few comments (7%) indicated that management in respondents' settings does not support the INCO to carry out their role effectively.

Other comments outlined that the LINC graduate is not currently working in a setting (26%) or are working part-time and therefore have not taken up the role (4%).

Developing Participants' Competence to Lead in Inclusion

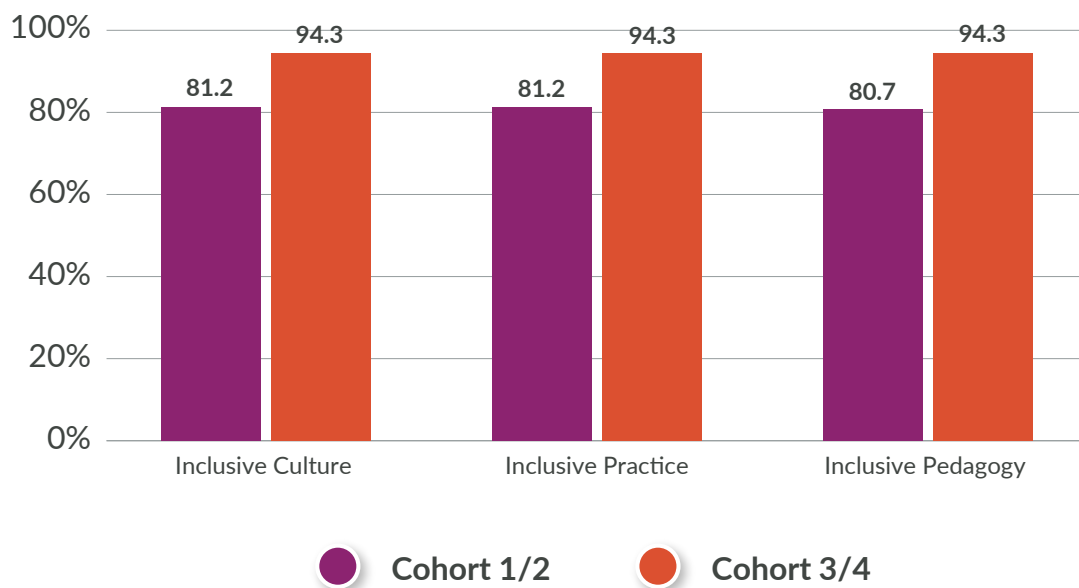
An important learning outcome of the LINC Level 6 Programme was preparing graduates to lead inclusion in their settings. The LINC Level 6 Programme outlines three key areas of competency which it seeks to prepare participants to lead in, namely inclusive culture; inclusive practice; and inclusive pedagogy. An inclusive culture refers to a context where children are welcomed and valued, as evident in the preschool environment, the settings' policies, and partnership with parents. An inclusive practice is understood to exist where transitions are supported, and the expertise of the early years team is utilised and enhanced by professional learning opportunities. Finally, an inclusive pedagogy is one whereby learning experiences are planned to meet the needs of all children, and strategies are implemented to support learning in a playful manner and are documented effectively to identify needs (see LINC Competency Framework, Appendix A for further information).

A key aim of the LINC+ CPD Programme is to further develop participants' competence to lead in these areas of competency. As part of the online evaluation surveys, participants were asked to indicate how well they felt each package developed their competence to lead in the three key LINC Programme areas of competency in their setting. Results compare findings between Cohorts 1/2 and 3/4 and are presented separately for each package.

Package 1

Most participants belonging to Cohort 1/2 (n = 244) felt Package 1 developed their competence to lead in the three key LINC Programme areas of competency well or very well. Almost all participants belonging to Cohort 3/4 (n = 122) felt Package 1 developed their competence to lead an inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy well or very well. Results are illustrated in Figure 17.

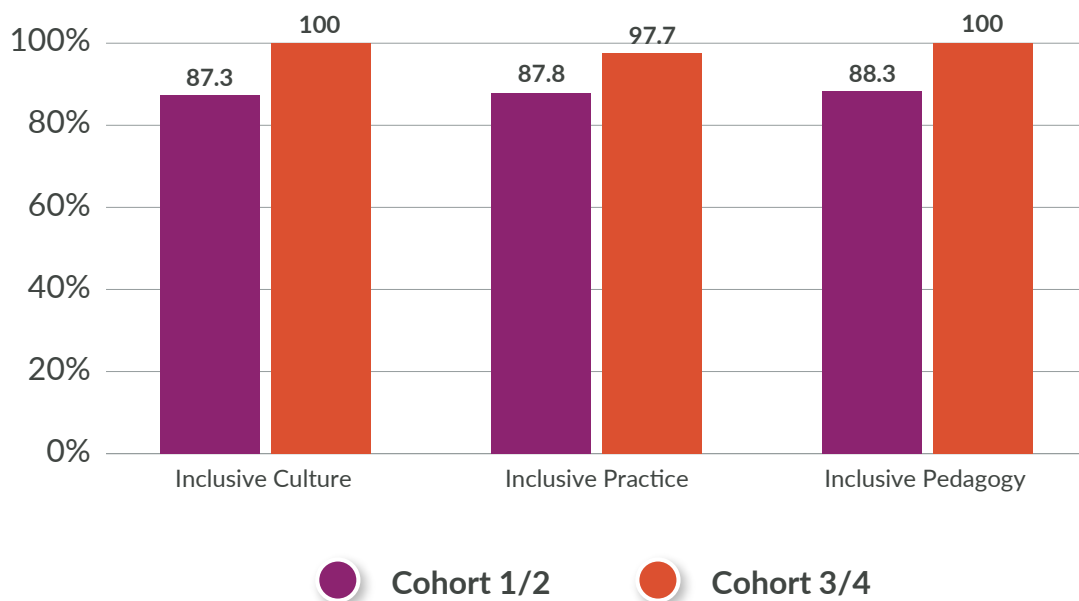
Figure 17. Development of participants' competence to lead in inclusion (P1)



Package 2

Most participants belonging to Cohort 1/2 (n = 197) felt Package 2 developed their competence to lead in the three key LINC Programme areas of competency well or very well. Almost all participants belonging to Cohort 3/4 (n = 44) felt Package 2 developed their competence to lead an inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy well or very well. Results are illustrated in Figure 18.

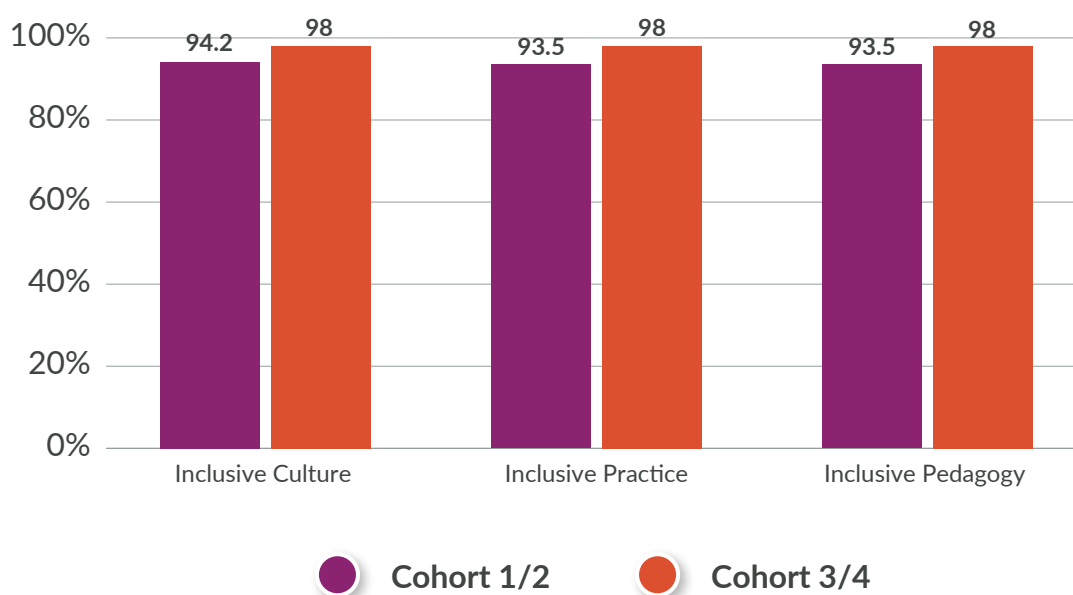
Figure 18. Development of participants' competence to lead in inclusion (P2)



Package 3

Almost all participants belonging to Cohort 1/2 (n = 275) and Cohort 3/4 (n = 50) felt Package 3 developed their competence to lead in the three key LINC Programme areas of competency well or very well. Results are illustrated in Figure 19.

Figure 19. Development of participants' competence to lead in inclusion (P3)



Qualitative Survey Data

Nine participants completed an online qualitative survey to further investigate the competencies developed through engaging with LINC+ and the extent to which the programme provided strategies and supports to enable participants to lead inclusive early learning and care (ELC) settings. A number of themes were identified from participants' responses using a thematic analysis of the data, discussed below.

Theme 1: Motivation to Undertake LINC+

As participation in LINC+ is unaccredited, gaining insight into the motivations of early childhood teachers to undertake a programme of professional learning is a considerable point of interest. The comments from participants indicated a common motivation to partake in professional learning in order to fulfil their roles effectively and to "be the best you can be for children and staff" in their settings.

Some participants' motivations were related to their commitment to excellence in their role as INCO. These participants were seeking to keep up-to-date with the field of inclusion in order to carry out their role effectively and support children with additional

needs in their setting. One participant hoped the programme would clarify the role of the INCO so they could draft a job description to share with management in their setting and carry out their duties more effectively. Another participant was seeking strategies to help cascade their learning about inclusion to their colleagues in order to create a stronger culture of inclusion in their setting.

A few participants provided more general motivations for participating. Two participants expressed how much they had loved the LINC Level 6 Programme which encouraged them to continue their LINC journey with LINC+. Another expressed their love of learning and recognised the importance of peer-learning and keeping up to date with professional learning for working effectively with children and staff. One participant outlined that building community with likeminded professionals was a key motivator for undertaking the programme, particularly in the context of starting the programme during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From completing the LINC programme in 2016, it sparked a love of learning for me. Learning has become a part of my working role, it is a vital element to stay current in your knowledge and to gain from the experiences of others, so I can be the best form of myself to support the families, children and staff I come to contact within my role.

- Participant 6

Theme 2: Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings

Participants commented on the new knowledge and skills they developed through engaging with the first three packages of LINC+, how they have applied this new learning to their practice, and the impact this has made on their capacity to lead inclusive ELC settings, discussed in the sub-themes below.

Sub-theme: New Knowledge and Skills

Across each of the three packages, participants commented on how they were stimulated to reflect on their current skill set, identify areas for improvement, and provided with direction on how to do so. The specific points raised by participants tended to align closely with the learning outcomes for each package discussed in Chapter One.

Participants commented that Package 1 provided detailed knowledge regarding how to establish and develop Communities of Practice (CoPs) and an understanding of the benefits of CoPs, including the creation of new knowledge, opportunities for shared reflection, and as a forum for peer support, each of which has the potential to contribute

to the enhancement of inclusion in ELC settings. Participants outlined that Package 2 reinforced the importance of the role of the INCO for children and families. Elements of the package which were particularly helpful included its focus on developing leadership skills; the importance of cascading new knowledge to colleagues; and the concept of distributed leadership for the enhancement of quality and inclusion for the benefit of staff, children and families. Package 3 furnished participants with an increased understanding of children's social and emotional development, the knowledge that "behaviour is communication", and the practical skills to recognise children's communication and emotions.

Sub-theme: Changes to Practice

Participants commented on several tangible changes that they have made to their practice, policies, and environments in their setting on foot of their engagement with LINC+. In relation to working with and leading their colleagues, participants elaborated on how they have restructured team meetings based on their new knowledge of CoPs and their enhanced understanding of the importance of distributed leadership, which has supported their team in their daily practices and communication. Participants have also encouraged their staff members to reach out to other professionals in the sector to build their own connections. Other participants shared how their new learning has been cascaded to their colleagues, for example one participant created a PowerPoint which staff can refer to regarding how to support children's social and emotional development.

Participants commented further on the different approaches to supporting children's social and emotional development which they have now incorporated into their setting's practice, including the addition of resources to develop children's emotional literacy and more open communication about emotions with children (e.g., prompts in the environment for children and staff) and strategies such as "step in, set up and fade out" which support children in resolving conflict by affording them the opportunity to think, reflect and learn from different situations.

Participants also outlined how the programme prompted them to critically evaluate their setting's learning environments in consultation with children and make changes to better reflect children's interests, strengths and challenges. One participant expressed they had submitted a proposal to management regarding the creation of a sensory space for children in their setting.

In relation to setting policies, one participant commented that they drafted a statement on the voice of the child whilst another had created a new policy on outdoor play. Another outlined how they were prompted to revisit the setting's approach to developing partnerships with parents.

Sub-theme: Impact on the Ground

Participants commented on the impact of their new learning and changes to practice within their settings. Participants referred to enhanced communication with both colleagues and children. A few participants elaborated on how building CoPs with other providers and professionals in their locality has made an impact on their setting's daily routines and activities. For example, one participant commented on how their team's increased awareness of self-regulation and social-emotional development has supported children's emotional wellbeing. Another participant expressed how building connections with fellow INCOs through the programme has reduced their feelings of isolation. The potential impact of sharing knowledge in the context of CoPs within the ELC sector for the enhancement of inclusion was also raised by participants.

Participants also noted an increase in confidence in performing their role as INCO as well as a reaffirmed commitment to the inclusion of all children in the early years following the programme. One participant felt that inclusion and quality in settings is supported by an increased tendency to embrace staff members' individual interests and strengths as well as committing to a child-led strengths-based approach. Another participant felt their team was now more cohesive and shared a joint vision and approach to ensuring all children's inclusion following their engagement with LINC+.

Theme 3: Wider Sectoral Context

It is also important to contextualise the role of INCO and understand the factors which hinder and enable LINC graduates to carry out their role, apply their new learning to practice, and ensure the full and meaningful inclusion of children in ELC settings. In the sub-themes below, participants outlined a number of challenges faced by early childhood teachers, both at micro and macro level, which hinder the realisation of the LINC graduate role on the ground.

Sub-theme: Role of the INCO

Participants expressed a need to develop greater recognition for the role of the INCO in order to function more effectively, through enhanced financial compensation; allocation of time to carry out the duties of the role; or by transforming the role into a standalone position. One participant felt the role should be extended to be a community-based

role via additional professional development. A few participants felt that although the content of LINC+ was wonderful in theory, given time constraints and lack of support from management it is difficult to enact in practice which can be stressful.

Participants also commented on challenges within the wider ELC sector which impact on inclusion. One participant stated that strategies for supporting early childhood teachers from burnout in a sector which they felt is over-regulated are necessary for the continuity of inclusive practices. One participant felt that in order to truly support inclusion, the AIM model needs to be extended (please note this survey was conducted prior to the publication of the End-of-year Three Evaluation of AIM and government commitments to its extension; Robinson et al. 2024). Two participants referred to access to specialists as necessary to supporting quality provision. One participant referred to the Demonstration Project model (Lynch et al. 2020), a piloted model of in-setting therapy service provision, and felt this multi-disciplinary collaborative approach is the way forward to supporting the full inclusion of all children in the early years.

Sub-theme: Professional Learning for Early Years Workforce

In order to support early childhood teachers in undertaking professional learning programmes, participants felt that time should be allocated to professional development and to sharing new learning with colleagues; and that there should be financial compensation for partaking in programmes of professional learning. One participant suggested an in-service day model similar to the primary education sector would be welcome.

Another participant felt that asynchronous professional learning programmes similar to the LINC+ model would be appropriate for busy early childhood teachers. With regards to inclusion, continued access to relevant, up-to-date information and resources would also support INCOs in their role. Participants felt that access to an active CoP would support them in their role by allowing them to keep abreast of developments in the field of inclusion, obtain support with getting staff on board with inclusion, and share ideas.

Participants' LINC+ Journey

In order to capture participants' overall experience of LINC+ during its first three packages, data from two randomly selected participants who partook in the focus groups/qualitative survey were compiled in story format as illustrative cases. Please note that pseudonyms have been used to preserve participant anonymity.

Caroline's LINC+ Journey

Caroline is currently working as a manager and INCO in a community setting located in a rural area offering sessional and school age care services. She had been working in the ELC sector for seven years at the time of participating in the research. Caroline expressed that her motivation for undertaking the programme was due to her positive experience of the LINC Level 6 Programme which encouraged her to continue her learning journey with LINC+. A challenge for Caroline in her role is having discussions with parents about AIM and getting them on board with the idea of making an application so that the setting is facilitated in providing the best support to the child.

Caroline found the content of the programme very relevant and up to date. The first three packages of LINC+ provided her with an insight into the processes of establishing and developing a community of practice (CoP), an enhanced understanding of leadership and how to develop leadership skills, and the confidence to manage the myriad situations that may arise when working in an ELC setting. Caroline expressed how the programme prompted her to reflect on areas in her skill set and practice that required further development and the knowledge and strategies of how to implement positive changes to benefit staff and children in her setting. She felt that having easy access to different resources that can be difficult to identify in the rush of administrative responsibilities is helpful, and streamlines finding the best solutions for children.

Caroline was currently involved in a virtual chat group with other INCOs using WhatsApp (2025) at the time of taking part in the research and was eager for this to develop into a more formalised CoP as it had already proven a helpful forum for seeking advice and support and gaining fresh perspectives on daily challenges. In a sector which is so demanding of professionals' time, she felt that sharing ideas for the setting's environment which have passed inspections, strategies for discussing AIM with parents, and other similar proven solutions within the context of CoPs can help save time and effort. She also expressed that being a manager in a rural setting can be very isolating, so she appreciated the connection and encouragement from others

in a similar position to her own that involvement in a CoP allows.

Her WhatsApp group (WhatsApp 2025) had been formed towards the end of the LINC Programme with her classmates, but upon commencing LINC+ it had been opened up to new members in their locality who were also undertaking the programme. She felt an in-person gathering could help develop the text-based chatgroup into a more interactive and formalised CoP and that the fact that LINC graduates had a common understanding of inclusion would bolster this process. She felt that establishing a process of how to select a topic for a CoP meeting and how to run through it as well as establishing a realistic goal for the frequency of meetups would support the development of a regularly interacting CoP. This would also let members know in advance that they will leave the session with some new piece of knowledge or strategy they can take back to their setting and encourage greater interaction.

Susan's LINC+ Journey

Susan is currently working in a city-based community setting which offers a sessional service. She has been working in the ELC sector for approximately 25 years and at the time of participating in the research had been in the role of INCO for one year alongside managing and performing the role of early childhood teacher. Susan was motivated to sign up for LINC+ to gain further support in carrying out the role of INCO in her setting by gaining access to up-to-date information and guidance. In particular, Susan was seeking strategies for encouraging colleagues in her setting to understand and value inclusion more deeply in order to best support children and families.

Susan expressed how the LINC+ CPD Programme has matured to include relevant resources and videos and embrace a variety of learning styles. Throughout the first three packages of LINC+, Susan gained a deeper understanding of the value of connecting with likeminded professionals for accessing ongoing support and guidance and obtained enhanced insight into the practice of distributed leadership and extending a strengths-based approach to both staff members and children in settings to support inclusion. Together with colleagues and children she reflected on the setting's environments and made changes to more effectively support children's development. While engaging with the programme's first three packages, Susan and her colleagues were motivated to create a new outdoor play policy for their setting,

draft a statement on the voice of the child and child participation, and reconsider their approach to developing partnerships with parents.

In order to continue progressing in her role as INCO, Susan outlined how regular participation in a community of practice (CoP) to get support and share ideas and challenges would be helpful. She is not currently involved in a CoP with other INCOs and she feels this is a gap for her in her current role as there are varying levels of understanding of inclusion among her colleagues who have not undertaken the LINC Programme. Therefore, peer support around inclusion is lacking as well as ideas on how to cascade her knowledge of inclusion to her colleagues. For Susan, involvement in a community of likeminded professionals would provide a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation.

Susan had attended a few peer-led CoP sessions with other LINC+ participants organised through the BigBlueButton (2025) but these failed to develop into regular meetings. She felt that greater structure to the peer-led CoPs is needed given the time commitment of partaking. She would also be keen to participate in CoPs in-person as she feels in-person interaction is fundamental to human connection but also because she sometimes struggles with the technology aspect of online learning. She feels that the CoP model of professional development would provide a context in which she would feel more confident to ask questions and share ideas compared to traditional models of professional learning.

Summary

Following the redevelopment of Packages 1 and 2, almost all participants (94 – 100%) felt the first three packages of LINC+ developed their competence to lead an inclusive culture, inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy in their setting well or very well.

Findings from the qualitative survey indicated that participants gleaned new knowledge, skills and strategies from Package 1 – 3 which they have cascaded to colleagues to bring about positive changes to practice in their settings.

Finally, on average, 72% of respondents to the package evaluation surveys indicated they were currently the appointed INCO in their setting. Whilst a few respondents specified that although they were not the appointed INCO, they shared responsibility for inclusion-related matters with their colleagues. However, a number of comments suggested that not all LINC graduates are being supported equally by management in their settings to carry out the INCO role.

Chapter Seven: An Evolving Programme



An Evolving Programme

The LINC Consortium Steering Committee has prioritised the pivotal importance of responding to all participant feedback and making relevant adjustments to the programme that reflects this feedback. The National Coordinator of the LINC Programme together with the LINC+ CPD Programme developers and LINC+ tutor have therefore remained attuned to participant feedback and adaptations have been made to the programme content and delivery on an ongoing basis. This chapter describes the key changes incorporated into the LINC+ CPD Programme to date on foot of the findings emerging from the present evaluation.

Content and Delivery of LINC+ Packages

Content

As mentioned previously, Cohorts 3 and 4 engaged with the second iteration of Packages 1 and 2 which were reviewed and amended based on feedback from Cohorts 1 and 2. In the first instance, the online lessons of Package 1 and 2 were re-recorded for Cohorts 3 and 4. This was conducted in order to correct issues with audio quality and to reduce repetition in the lessons, particularly Package 1.

The redeveloped lessons also increasingly signposted relevant resources for participants to use in their settings. To this end, a resources tab was incorporated into the online lesson slides where participants can easily gain access to the resources discussed in the units.

Another area highlighted by participants was a dearth of Irish-produced video content and resources featuring Irish early learning and care (ELC) settings and experiences, meaning that participants are obliged to reflect on video scenarios representing overseas perspectives. In response, Irish-based content was produced for the LINC+ CPD Programme featuring examples from practice in settings in Ireland. This content includes a podcast by the LINC tutors on outdoor pedagogy included in Package 3 and a video of an Irish outdoor setting filmed and produced for Package 5.

Increases in satisfaction with package content, resources, and application to practice (Chapter 4), in addition to improvements in how well participants felt the packages developed their competence to lead in inclusion (Chapter 6) captured by the survey data comparing Cohorts 1/2 and 3/4, suggest the positive implications of the redevelopment of the packages.

Delivery

In addition to the amendments described above, the programme also shifted to an asynchronous mode of delivery from Package 3 onwards. Accordingly, once the participant completed one unit of a package, the next unit became available to them automatically. Beforehand, participants had to wait for the release of the units according to a specific schedule. This asynchronous mode of delivery ensured that participants could engage with the online lessons at a time which suited them.

Furthermore, with the support of the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development Centre (LEAD) at MIC, the look, feel, and navigability of the online lessons were enhanced to be more interactive, more visually pleasing, and to conform with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST 2018; 2024).

According to the package evaluation surveys, participants were highly satisfied with these aspects of programme delivery. Across the Package 1, 2 and 3 survey evaluations, almost all respondents from Cohorts 3/4 reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with the programme's asynchronous, online model of learning and with the look, feel and navigability of the online lessons. This question was not included in the Cohort 1/2 surveys so it is unclear how participant satisfaction with these aspects of programme delivery may have changed since these amendments were incorporated. However, increases in satisfaction with the programme time frame were observed subsequent to the shift to asynchronous delivery comparing Cohorts 1/2 and Cohorts 3/4 (Chapter 4).

In order to encourage deeper reflection on the package content, a reflective discussion piece was incorporated at the end of each package which required participants to outline the learning and strategies they gleaned from their engagement. In order to maximise the value of the online discussions, the LINC+ tutor also took on a greater role in moderating, replying to, and weaving participants' responses. Weaving is a form of moderating students' online discussions to support learning, engagement, and collaboration whereby tutors respond to and connect participants' different ideas, summarise key points and pose relevant questions (Salmon 2000). This approach recognises learners' contributions and can act as a motivational factor in addition to promoting cohesion among participants. While participant satisfaction with the assessment of the packages increased, caution is advised in attributing this increase in satisfaction solely to this change.

Much of the feedback from the evaluations of Packages 1, 2 and 3 has also been incorporated into the design of Packages 4, 5 and 6. These adaptations have included: a reduction in the length of the package units; greater use of audio, podcasts, and videos; greater signposting of relevant resources and weblinks; and the inclusion of videos and examples which are more representative of practice on the ground (e.g., more realistic adult-child ratios depicted).

Communities of Practice

In addition to the redevelopment of the content and delivery of the LINC+ packages, the delivery and level of support with the Community of Practice (CoP) aspects of the programme have undergone several changes based on data collected as part of the present interim evaluation.

Tutor-Led CoP Sessions

Originally, the tutor-led CoP sessions were organised within the individual packages of the programme and were scheduled to take place near to the release date of that package. This created issues with attendance given the self-paced nature of participant engagement and the fact that participants can choose the order in which to engage with each of the packages. Given this, the location of these sessions was taken out of the individual package pages on the online learning platform and re-located to a dedicated CoP page. The sessions were opened up to all participants currently engaged with the programme, regardless of the package they were currently engaged with. Furthermore, more tutor-led sessions were facilitated, and each session was given greater focus and structured around a particular theme.

Peer-Led CoPs

Whilst the tutor-led CoP sessions were conceptualised to help catalyse participants into connecting with and forming their own CoPs with fellow LINC+ participants, feedback from the surveys and focus group discussions indicated that learners needed more support in establishing and leading their own CoPs.

In order to empower and build participants' confidence in establishing and leading their own CoPs with each other, the LINC+ tutor made a conscious effort in the tutor-led sessions to place more emphasis on the language and meaning of CoPs so that learners can identify and recognise the CoPs they are already engaged with in support of their practice.

Beginning in February 2023, the LINC+ tutor commenced providing additional one-to-one mentoring to participants to establish their own peer-led CoPs. To date, this process has been carried out with three LINC+ participants, two of whom successfully started peer-led discussions on the designated peer-led discussion forum. The LINC+ tutor is also in the initial phases of setting up three further CoPs to work with small groups of participants to establish peer-led CoPs.

At the end of May 2023, the LINC+ tutor subsequently committed to supporting the establishment of peer-led CoP sessions focussing on themes developed during the recent tutor-led CoP sessions (connection; support; community). In doing so, the LINC+ tutor set up three monthly sessions (June, July, August) across five regions: Cork/Kerry (13 participants); Kildare (7 participants); Clare (8 participants); Limerick (8 participants); and Dublin (6 participants). In brackets are the numbers of participants who have signed up to the groups to date. The LINC+ tutor also invited any other interested participants to get in contact if they want to engage in these groups or would like help in establishing one in their county. The objective is to support these groups until September at which stage the LINC+ tutor will withdraw and allow the peer-led CoPs to continue to develop among LINC+ participants. The LINC+ tutor will continue to remind participants via programme announcements when the sessions will take place and encouraging others to join.

Furthermore, these peer-led groups each have their own dedicated section on the CoP Moodle page to use as a space for hosting live sessions (MIC 2025).

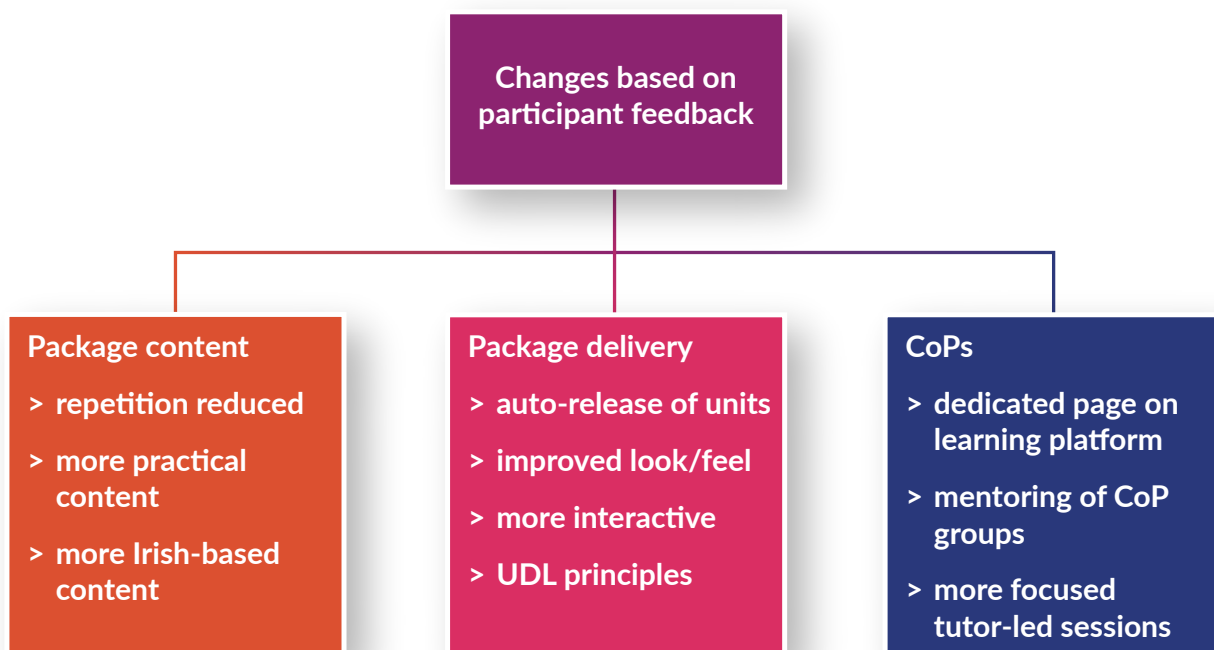
Future Directions

Other feedback which has not yet been implemented into the programme and is still under consideration include: the provision of themes by the LINC+ tutor to prompt peer-led discussions on the online discussion forum; the assignment of participants and topics to peer-led CoP sessions given feedback from participants that they would like to partake but have little free time to organise/take a leading role; and the organisation of an in-person meet-up for LINC+ participants to network and establish groups for peer-led CoPs.

Summary

The key changes incorporated into the LINC+ CPD Programme content, delivery and CoPs element to date, based on participant feedback emerging from the present evaluation, are summarised in Figure 20.

Figure 20. Key changes incorporated into programme following participant feedback



Chapter Eight: Conclusion and Implications



Conclusion and Implications

The aim of this multi-method research evaluation was to investigate the extent to which the LINC+ CPD Programme is achieving its aim of consolidating and deepening the existing knowledge(s), practices and values of LINC graduates for the enhancement of inclusion in early learning and care (ELC) settings (LINC Consortium 2019; 2024; Urban et al. 2011; Urban et al. 2017), in its first three packages. The combined findings from the multiple strands of the present evaluation, framed by the adaptation of Guskey's (2002) approach to evaluating programmes of professional learning, indicate that participants were satisfied with the programme's content and delivery, were eager to continue their LINC learning journey through engaging in Communities of Practice (CoPs), and developed their competencies as leaders of inclusion in their settings. The key findings of the present evaluation are summarised below.

Participant Overall Satisfaction with LINC+

Chapter Three presented findings from package evaluation surveys distributed to participants upon completion of Packages 1, 2 and 3 of LINC+. Participants reported high levels of satisfaction in relation to their overall experience of the first three packages of LINC+. Notably, where changes were made to the content and delivery of Packages 1 and 2 based on participant feedback, satisfaction with these packages rose significantly such that almost all participants reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied. At the time of being surveyed, 95 – 98% of participants felt satisfied/very satisfied across Packages 1 – 3 following these amendments. When asked to list three positive aspects of the packages, results of a word cloud analysis emphasised participants' satisfaction with the programme's content, resources and the new information and practical ideas gleaned from their participation that have benefitted their practice and children in their settings.

Appropriateness of LINC+ Content and Delivery

Chapter Four investigated the appropriateness of the LINC+ CPD Programme's online asynchronous model of delivery, modes of learning, and course content in providing strategies and supports to participants to enable them to lead inclusive ELC settings. Findings from the package evaluation surveys indicated that almost all participants were satisfied or very satisfied with each package's content, resources, assessment, time frame, and application to practice. Increases with satisfaction with these aspects of Packages 1 and 2 were observed following the implementation of changes to the content and delivery of these packages based on participant feedback.

Across packages 1 – 3, almost all participants reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with the programme’s fully online mode of learning, the asynchronous (pre-recorded lessons) mode of learning, and the look, feel, and navigability of the online lessons. Participant comments revealed that participants felt the online lessons accommodated diverse learning styles and needs; that the variety of media used was engaging; that opportunities for peer interaction afforded by the programme were appreciated; and that the self-paced time frame was suitable for busy professionals. However, a few participants found navigating the online learning platforms, Moodle (MIC 2025) and the BigBlueButton (2025), challenging, would like an in-person element to be incorporated into the programme, and more opportunities for peer engagement.

Findings from an exit survey distributed to participants who withdrew from LINC+ indicated that almost all who cited ‘programme content and delivery’ as the reason for withdrawing belonged to the first cohort of participants. As previously outlined, multiple amendments were made to the content and delivery of Packages 1 and 2 following feedback from the first and second cohorts. Other reasons for withdrawal included the time commitment needed to participate, lack of incentive for participating, and an absence of support from management to implement the learning from the programme to practice.

Communities of Practice for LINC+ Participants

Chapter Five sought to uncover the experiences and motivations of LINC+ participants in developing and engaging in CoPs, and the contributions made through peer engagement and peer learning to the enhancement of practice, particularly as it relates to inclusion. Between 22 – 57% of participants reported engaging in the tutor-facilitated CoP sessions across Packages 1 – 3. The proportion of participants who reported engaging with the peer-led discussion forum and peer-led CoP facility ranged from 26 – 50% and 11 – 28%, respectively. Approximately 40% of participants indicated that they had formed or joined their own CoP with other LINC+ participants, with the majority of those participants using WhatsApp (2025) as their primary means of engaging with their CoP. Participants most often cited lack of time as the reason for not engaging in a CoP with other LINC+ participants.

Focus group discussions with LINC+ participants emphasised a strong motivation to engage more fully in CoPs with fellow LINC graduates to share practical examples, ideas and knowledge, give and receive advice, obtain peer support and provide a sense of belonging within a community. Participants felt strongly that in-person meetings were essential to developing successful CoPs in the initial stages and highlighted that more support with structuring meetings and with navigating the BigBlueButton (2025) technology was needed as the CoP moves more online. The research findings highlighted the important role of the LINC+ tutor in supporting participants in developing peer-led CoPs. Consequently, the LINC+ tutor is now taking a more active mentoring role with groups of LINC+ participants during the initial stages of this process.

Increasingly in the Irish system CoPs are being identified as a solution-focused process that has the potential to support ELC settings and schools in sharing ideas, planning for best practices and creating repositories of expertise (Diggins 2025; Oide 2025). However, despite their growing popularity, there is a paucity of research examining their effectiveness as a model of professional learning in the early years. A systematic review of the effects of professional learning on the quality of early years services in Europe conducted by Peleman and colleagues (2018) indicated that models of continuing professional learning that provide opportunities for practitioners to network, disseminate best practice and reflect on practice through peer exchanges were among the most effective. The present evaluation adds to the limited body of research on the use of online CoPs as a model of professional learning in the early years. The findings may also legitimise the experience of participation in their CoP to members who can use the evaluation outcomes for further reflection on practice (Wenger et al. 2011).

Participants' Learning and Professional Development

Finally, Chapter Six presented findings regarding the extent to which graduates reported developing their professional competence as it relates to leading inclusion through engagement with the LINC+ CPD Programme. On average, 72% of respondents to the package evaluation surveys indicated they were currently the appointed INclusion COordinator (INCO) in their setting. A few respondents specified that whilst they were not the appointed INCO, inclusion-related responsibilities are shared amongst the team in their settings. However, a number of comments revealed that LINC graduates were not being supported by management in their settings to carry out the INCO role.

The LINC Level 6 Programme outlines three key areas of competency which it seeks to prepare participants to lead in, namely, inclusive culture; inclusive practice; and inclusive pedagogy. A key aim of the LINC+ CPD Programme is to further develop participants' competence to lead in these areas. Almost all participants felt the first three packages of LINC+ developed their competence to lead in these areas well or very well following updates to Packages 1 and 2.

A sample of nine participants completed an online qualitative survey to gain insight into the specific competencies they developed through engaging with the LINC+ CPD Programme and the extent to which the programme provided strategies and supports to enable them to lead inclusive ELC settings. Eight of these nine participants also took part in a focus group to explore their experiences within CoPs which they were encouraged and supported to form and develop through their engagement with the LINC+ CPD Programme. Through the survey and focus groups, participants elaborated on the application of their learning from the programme to practice, expressing their eagerness to progress in their role as INCO and to continue upskilling. These participants described their increased understanding of CoPs, leadership, and children's social and emotional development as well as the skills and strategies they have developed in these areas. They referred to changes in communicating with colleagues, cascading their learning to their teams and introducing changes to practice to support a cohesive approach to inclusion in their settings. Participants also outlined challenges to performing the role of INCO effectively, including time constraints; lack of recognition for the role; limited support from management and wider issues such as lack of access to specialists; burnout; and the need to extend the AIM model.

Implications for Future Policy and Practice Directions

Professional Learning Programmes

The findings of this interim evaluation highlight the merit of disseminating the andragogical practices of the LINC+ CPD Programme in the context of the development of programmes of professional learning for early childhood teachers across further and higher education and the development of DCEIDY's Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare professional learning infrastructure in Ireland. Professional learning which allows busy early childhood teachers to engage when time allows was considered appropriate to participants in the present evaluation. When the amount of content in the packages was reduced and the programme shifted to an asynchronous model of delivery, participant satisfaction increased. Whilst the approaches to online learning utilised by the programme were considered accessible, interactive and engaging, participants were eager to incorporate in-person learning into their experience particularly as regards their experiences of CoPs.

The findings of the present evaluation emphasise the potential of CoPs to bolster professional learning and enhance quality in ELC settings. Within the CoP literature, three key concepts have emerged which are considered instrumental to successful knowledge creation and transfer within CoPs: mutual engagement; joint enterprise; and shared repertoire (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger, 1998). Mutual engagement refers to the formation of relationships and norms within CoPs through interactions between members over time. Joint enterprise refers to the establishment of a shared understanding of the group mission, identity and practice. Shared repertoire refers to the unique set of resources and data built by a community. Research supports an empirical link between these features of CoPs and individual learning (e.g., Lesser and Storck 2001; Neufeld et al. 2013). Whilst participants in the focus groups may be in the early stages of developing mutual engagement, examples of shared identity, practice and resources were evident in their discussions.

LINC graduates possess a valuable ‘potpourri’ of prior educational and first-hand experiences (Ring et al. 2019) which they can bring to a CoP to share, reflect upon and learn from to support inclusive practice. The less formalised learning which takes place in CoPs may suit a wider range of students of varying abilities and previous experience. This format of professional learning may also foster INCOs’ sense of autonomy over their learning and practice which may connect to their capacity to be an agent of positive change in leading inclusion in their setting. In CoPs, whilst hierarchical structures may develop, the knowledge base of a community is dispersed throughout the group and is not held by any one member (Duguid 2005). This may be of particular value to a sector which faces high staff turnover.

Other outcomes of engagement in CoPs include developing networks and building social connectedness. Teacher well-being is critical to effective practice which group membership can support. In addition to CoPs being an important source of knowledge, membership can promote a sense of group identity which is an important target for development among the early years workforce (Moloney 2010) which, in turn, has the potential to contribute to professionalisation of the sector and build professional recognition. Building social connectedness, gaining professional recognition and harnessing CoPs to advocate for better working conditions emerged as important to focus groups participants.

Within an increasingly complex sector there is a need for innovative and accessible professional learning opportunities for early childhood teachers. A CoP model of professional learning may provide a cost-effective and sustainable approach to supporting early childhood teachers' ongoing learning and to maintaining high-quality practice over time, which can, in turn, lead to enhanced learning experiences for children (Cherrington and Thornton 2015).

The findings of the evaluation are significant within the context of Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028 (DCEDIY 2021) in which the government has committed to providing professional learning opportunities and supports to develop leadership in settings and to build on the existing model of the INCO in mentoring and supporting co-professionals in the setting in an area of practice. The findings of the present evaluation not only provide a template of an effective model of professional learning for the sector but also insight into how the role of the INCO functions in practice and important lessons regarding the barriers and enablers which shape the performance of this role.

Supporting LINC Graduates in their Role

The findings of the present evaluation provide insight into important challenges to be addressed in order to support LINC graduates to effectively lead inclusion in their settings. Research highlights the central role of management in supporting inclusion (Fitzgerald 2018), confirming that the extent to which learners can apply new knowledge and skills in the workplace is dependent on support from leaders. As demonstrated in this evaluation report, early years staff may have limited autonomy to influence change in their setting. Communication structures and strategies developed with setting managers based on feedback from the evaluation of the LINC Level 6 Programme (LINC Consortium 2024) should continue to raise employers' awareness in relation to supporting their member of staff in their role as a leader for inclusion.

The interim evaluation findings also highlighted a simultaneous need to provide support to participants in sharing the learning from the programme with colleagues and to support shared reflection on inclusive practices through engagement in CoPs. Time emerged as a key factor which hinders LINC graduates in fulfilling the duties of the INCO role.

Several findings of the present evaluation are corroborated by the recently published End-of-year Three Evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) which noted that time, pay and working conditions have implications for the successful enactment of the INCO role (Robinson et al. 2024). The evaluation of AIM also highlighted the need for continuing professional learning for early years staff in inclusive practice. The findings of the present evaluation indicate the effectiveness of the LINC+ CPD Programme in ensuring the continued application of inclusive practices in settings and the sharing of up-to-date knowledge among colleagues. Additional professional learning gaps highlighted by the AIM evaluation in areas including social and emotional development and working in partnership with parent/carers are specifically addressed in the content of the LINC+ packages. Finally, the AIM evaluation identified the importance of quality and impact monitoring following programmes of professional learning which the present report contributes to by providing valuable insights into the outcomes of the LINC+ CPD Programme.

Summary

Overall, the findings of this interim evaluation have been effective in informing the LINC Consortium on the performance of the programme, allowing for a continuous improvement process based on participant feedback. The resulting report provides a permanent record of the outcomes of the LINC+ CPD Programme content and implementation to assist with future programme development and to inform policymakers on the impact and reach of the programme. The findings point to the potential of the LINC+ model of professional learning within the ELC sector in Ireland and the importance of the programme as an agent of change for supporting the inclusion of all children in early learning and care settings.

Furthermore, the findings from the evaluation demonstrate the contribution of the LINC+ CPD Programme to micro-policy implementation of the key macro-policy initiatives supporting high-quality inclusive ELC provision in Ireland (O'Sullivan and Ring 2023). The findings further corroborate the recent research on the Evaluation of the Better Start Quality Development Service (Cartwright et al. 2024) in highlighting the pivotal importance of continuing to develop a responsive and high-quality professional learning infrastructure for the ELC sector.

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Appendix A:

LINC Programme Competency Framework for Inclusion

A.	An inclusive culture
1.	All children are welcome
2.	All children are valued
3.	A focus is placed on promoting respectful interactions
4.	There are high expectations for all children
5.	Partnership with parents/carers is actively promoted
6.	Difference is acknowledged and celebrated
7.	The environment accommodates the needs of all children
8.	All policies are inclusive policies
B.	An inclusive practice
1.	Transitioning to and from the setting is a positive experience for children, families, and staff
2.	Support for children with additional needs is coordinated
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
C.	An inclusive pedagogy
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 to meet children's additional needs

Appendix B: The Role of the INclusion COordinator

The Role of INclusion COordinator (INCO)

Leading Inclusive Practice and Pedagogy

- **Leading inclusive practice, inclusive pedagogy** and an inclusive culture within the setting and providing support and information to staff and parents on inclusion of all children, with reference to the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines.
- **Cascading learning** throughout the staff in the setting so as to foster an inclusive culture.
- **Supporting staff** in the implementation of inclusive practices in curriculum planning and assessment which supports the regular reviewing of the learning environment, daily routines, activities and social interactions to enable children of all abilities and backgrounds to participate at an appropriate level in both individual and common tasks.
- **Sharing learning and good practice** regarding observations, documentation and curriculum planning and development, modelling good practice and utilising different strategies for collaborating with the team regarding effective communication with children, with reference to Aistear and Siolta principles and guidelines.
- **Engaging with national and local developments** related to inclusion in order to continue to lead the implementation of good practice in the setting.
- **Engaging with ongoing CPD** to ensure adherence to good practice in relation to developments within the disability sector and in relation to the inclusion of children with additional needs.



Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

- **Disseminating information on AIM**, as well as on inclusion more generally, to parents and staff.
- **Assisting with applications for supports under AIM** and liaising, where necessary, with the Early Years Specialists and other professionals working with the child. This could include meeting with parents through to using the Hive portal for the AIM application.
- **Liaising with Early Years Specialists** to develop strategies to support participation to ensure all children and their families are supported.
- **Working closely with parents and other professionals**, including the Early Years Specialists in cases where a child has complex additional needs which require more targeted supports and/ or additional assistance.
- **Liaising with parents and other professionals**, including the Early Years Specialists and Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) as appropriate, to support the transition of children to primary school.
- **Participating in any relevant evaluation or AIM review** to inform future practice and policy developments.



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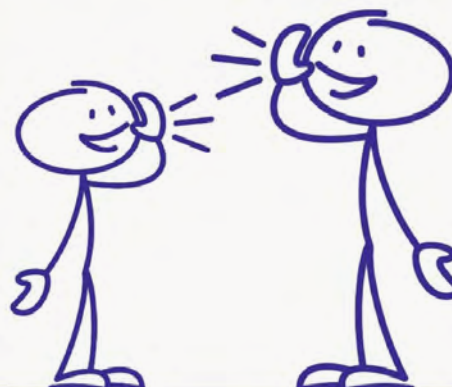
Diversity, Equality & Inclusion Charter and Guidelines

- **Promoting the National Inclusion Charter** and supporting staff to engage with the revised Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines 2016. This may involve the Inclusion Co-ordinator using relevant sections of the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines (exercises, critical questions and pointers) to stimulate discussion with staff and as a prompt to consider ideas for practice in facilitating an inclusive programme.
- **Supporting the setting** to complete and regularly review its Inclusion Policy.




Views of Children and Parents

- **Advocating on behalf of children** and engaging in regular consultation with children to allow their ideas, feelings and thoughts to contribute to service provision and delivery. Using feedback from children and their parents to inform the settings inclusion procedures, evaluation and to input into wider policy developments, as appropriate.




Appendix C:


Sample Package Satisfaction Survey




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LINC CPD 21/23 - Package 2, Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator - Evaluation

The LINC team is interested in hearing about your experience of the packages on the LINC Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Programme through a short survey, entitled *'Package Two: Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator - Evaluation'*, which contains some open and closed questions. Your views will help to inform how the LINC CPD Programme is delivered in the future with a view to enhancing both policy and practice for the inclusion of all children in the early years. The data may also be used to inform research and for presentations.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and confidential and no personal information that could identify you will be gathered as part of this. Participation in the survey is not compulsory, nor is participation in the study linked in any way to your achievement on the LINC CPD Programme. The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete and you may also exit the survey at any time during the process.

If you have any concerns or require further information in relation to the survey, please do not hesitate to contact Linda at linc@mic.ul.ie or at the following number: 061-204545. Alternatively, if you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact: MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on 061-204980 or mirec@mic.ul.ie.

Your willingness to participate in this research is greatly appreciated.

If you wish to participate in the research, please continue below, otherwise please close the page now.

*** 1. I am willing to participate in the research study entitled *'A participant evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Programme'* being conducted by the LINC Consortium. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any presentations/publications that arise from this project.**

☐ Please tick here to confirm your agreement

LINC CPD 21/23 – Package 2, Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator - Evaluation

* 2. Having completed Package 2, Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator, how do you feel about the package overall?

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 3. Based on your experience, how do you feel about each of the following aspects of Package 2, Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator?

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Resources (such as additional readings, videos, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Assessment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time-frame	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Application to Practice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tutor Support	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 4. Having completed Package 2, Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator, how well do you feel that the package has developed your competence to lead the following areas?

	Very Poor	Poor	Neutral	Well	Very Well
An inclusive culture, where children are welcomed and valued, as evident in the preschool environment, the settings' policies, and partnership with parents.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusive practice where transitions are supported and the expertise of the early years team is utilised and enhanced by training opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusive pedagogy whereby learning experiences are planned to meet the needs of all children, and strategies are implemented to support learning in a playful manner, and are documented effectively to identify needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 5. Did you engage with the Tutor-Facilitated Communities of Practice Session for Package 2?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

* 6. Having completed the Tutor-Facilitated Communities of Practice (CoP) Session for Package 2, please let us know your satisfaction with the following: (Please select N/A if you did not engage with the session)

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	N/A
Content and Delivery of Live CoP Session	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Big Blue Button Breakout Rooms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Big Blue Button Text Chat	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Big Blue Button Audio Chat	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 7. Did you engage with the Peer-Led/Self-Facilitated Communities of Practice Moodle Forum?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

* 8. Having engaged with the Peer-Led/Self-Facilitated Communities of Practice Moodle Forum, please let us know your satisfaction: (Please select N/A if you did not engage with this feature)

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	N/A
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 9. Did you engage with the Peer-Led/Self-Facilitated Communities of Practice BigBlueButton Facility?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

* 10. Having engaged with the Peer-Led/Self-Facilitated Communities of Practice BigBlueButton Facility, please let us know your satisfaction: (Please select N/A if you did not engage with this feature)

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	N/A
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 11. From your engagement in the LINC CPD Programme, have you joined/started your own Community of Practice with other Inclusion Coordinators?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

12. If you have joined/started a Community of Practice with other Inclusion Coordinators from your engagement in the LINC CPD Programme please indicate what forum you have used:

- ☐ BigBlueButton on Moodle
☐ Moodle Discussion Forum
☐ WhatsApp
☐ Facebook
☐ Other (please specify)

- ☐ N/A

13. List three positive aspects of Package 2, Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator:

Positive Aspect 1	<input type="text"/>
Positive Aspect 2	<input type="text"/>
Positive Aspect 3	<input type="text"/>

14. List three things you would change about Package 2, Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the Inclusion Coordinator:

Change 1

Change 2

Change 3

* 15. What is your highest qualification level to date?

16. Please feel free to add any further comments, if you wish:

Appendix D:

LINC+ CPD Programme Exit Survey

The LINC team is interested in hearing about your reasons for withdrawing from the LINC CPD Programme. Your views will help to inform how the LINC CPD Programme is delivered in the future with a view to enhancing both policy and practice in including all children in the early years.

Your participation in this survey is **voluntary** and **confidential** and **no personal information** that could identify you will be gathered as part of this. The survey should take no more than 2 minutes to complete and you may also exit the survey at any time.

If you have any concerns or require further information in relation to the survey, please do not hesitate to contact Linda at linc@mic.ul.ie or at the following number: 061-204545. Alternatively, if you have concerns about this survey and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact: MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on 061-204980 or mirec@mic.ul.ie.

If you wish to participate, please continue below, otherwise please close the page now.

1. I am willing to participate in the survey entitled '*LINC CPD Programme Exit Survey*' being conducted by the LINC Consortium. I understand my participation in this survey is voluntary and confidential and no personal information that could identify me will be gathered.

☐ Please tick here to confirm your agreement

2. Please let us know the reason(s) you withdrew from the LINC CPD Programme:

- ☐ Personal circumstances
- ☐ Change of career goals
- ☐ Programme content and delivery
- ☐ Prefer not to say

If you selected 'Programme content and delivery' please elaborate on your response:

3. Do you plan on returning to the LINC CPD Programme in the future?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

4. What is your highest qualification level (in Early Childhood Education) to date?

- ☐ Level 5
- ☐ Level 6
- ☐ Level 7
- ☐ Level 8
- ☐ Level 9
- ☐ Level 10

5. Please feel free to add any further comments on your experience of the LINC CPD Programme, if you wish:

Appendix E:

Online Qualitative Survey

The LINC team is interested in learning about the impact of the LINC Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Programme on enhancing inclusion in the early years through a qualitative survey, entitled '*A participant evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Programme*'. Your views will help to inform how the LINC CPD Programme is delivered in the future with a view to enhancing both policy and practice for the inclusion of all children in the early years. The data may also be used to inform research and for presentations.

The survey should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. As part of the survey, you will be invited to share examples from your practice and/or extracts from your reflective journals, if you wish.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and confidential. Participation in the survey is not compulsory, nor is participation in the study linked in any way to your achievement on the LINC CPD Programme. You may exit the survey at any time during the process.

If you have any concerns or require further information in relation to the survey, please do not hesitate to contact Linda at linc@mic.ul.ie or at the following number: 061-204545. Alternatively, if you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact: MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on 061-204980 or mirec@mic.ul.ie.

Your willingness to participate in this research is greatly appreciated. If you wish to participate in the research, please continue below, otherwise please close the page now.

1. I am willing to participate in the research study entitled '*A participant evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Programme*' being conducted by the LINC Consortium. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any presentations/publications that arise from this project.

Please tick here to confirm your agreement ☐

2. Full Name:
3. Setting Type (e.g., sessional; full-day):
4. Setting location (county):
5. Number of years working in sector:

The following questions focus on your experience thus far of the LINC CPD Programme. You may include extracts from your reflective journal in your responses, if you wish. There is no word limit and you can expand the textboxes by dragging the bottom right corner of the box.

6. What was your motivation for enrolling in the LINC CPD Programme?
7. What was the most significant thing you learned from *Package 1 - Communities of Practice in Early Learning and Care* and what is its significance to your practice and to children in your setting?
8. What was the most significant thing you learned from *Package 2 - Leading Inclusive Early Learning and Care Settings: The Role of the INclusion COordinator* and what is its significance to your practice and to children in your setting?
9. What was the most significant thing you learned from *Package 3 - Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Development* and what is its significance to your practice and to children in your setting?
10. What would support you in your continuing professional development process in the future in your role as INclusion COordinator?

Appendix F:

Focus Group Interview Schedule

Before commencing the focus group interviews the researcher will reiterate the study's anonymity and confidentiality procedures and obtain verbal consent from participants to commence recording the session.

1. Can you introduce yourselves?

Prompts: Name; Location; Type of CoP formed/joined (e.g., online/in-person; with other INCOs/other educators or relevant professionals).

2. Can you tell me about your experience of forming or joining your CoP?

Prompts: When, Why and How? Role of CPD Programme?

3. Can you tell me some of your story about your interactions within the CoP?

Prompts: How often do you interact?; What is your role?; Types of activities (e.g., problem-solving; sharing experiences); Platforms/Tools used to communicate and share resources; Opening up/developing trust.

4. Can you tell me about one thing you have learned or taken from your participation in the CoP and why it is significant?

Prompts: To you; To your practice; To children in your setting.

5. Can you tell me about how your experience of learning within your CoP has differed from formalised programmes you have previously undertaken?

6. Can you tell me about the expectations you have for your CoP in the future?

7. Lastly, is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix G:

Supplementary Analyses

Table 9. Overall satisfaction with Packages 1 – 3

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Package 1 Cohort 1/2	2.1%	6.2%	13.5%	43.0%	35.3%
Package 1 Cohort 3/4	0.0%	0.8%	2.5%	41.0%	55.7%
Package 2 Cohort 1/2	1.0%	2.5%	13.2%	39.6%	43.7%
Package 2 Cohort 3/4	0.0%	0.0%	4.6%	47.7%	47.7%
Package 3 Cohort 1/2	0.4%	0.7%	4.4%	34.9%	59.6%
Package 3 Cohort 3/4	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%	22.0%	76.0%

Table 10. Positive aspects of Package 1 (Cohorts 1/2)

Content	Delivery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensible (21) • Interesting/engaging (14) • Informative (12) • Comprehensive (5) • Relevant (5) • Concise (3) • Useful/practical (7) • General satisfaction (9) • Good resources (15) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-presented (5) • Interactive CoP sessions (6) • Accessible (7) • Time frame (20) • Online (5) • Easy to navigate (3) • Facilitator's voice engaging (1) • Assessment (5) • General satisfaction (4)
Knowledge & Learning	Interpersonal Aspect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New/updated existing knowledge (48) • Refreshed/reaffirmed previous learning (32) • New ideas/strategies (11) • Increased awareness of CoPs (15) • Importance of collaborative practice (22) • Importance of/opportunities for reflection (10) • Understanding of leadership styles (6) • Benefit to INCO role/impact on practice (33) • Good resources (15) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for networking (26) • Peer learning (28) • Peer support (12) • Plans to join/create CoP (10) • General support/support from tutor (15)
	Personal Development
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased feeling of empowerment/confidence (10) • Importance of CPD (18)
	None
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants could not list any positive aspect (4)

Table 11. Positive aspects of Package 1 (Cohorts 3/4)

Content	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informative (18) • Practical/relevant (15) • Easy to follow (10) • Thought-provoking (5) • Interesting/engaging (5) • General satisfaction (4) • Up-to-date (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General satisfaction (4) • Viewing activities (3) • Readings (1)
Knowledge & Learning	Delivery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New/updated previous knowledge (30) • Learning about CoPs (5); understanding of inclusion (2); importance of effective communication (2); importance of child-centred practice (1); importance of collaboration (5); value of distributed leadership (1); importance of educator well-being (1) • Importance of reflection/ opportunities to reflect on practice (9) • New ideas (3) • Recognition of previous learning/ experiences (1) • Refreshed/reaffirmed previous learning (8) • Upskilling (1); leadership skills (1) • Intention to cascade learning to colleagues (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time frame (2) • Asynchronous learning (14) • Easy to navigate (10) • Layout of content (4) • Positive learning environment (1) • High quality/range of media (2) • Online learning (2) • Lesson transcripts (1) • Interactive (1) • Tick boxes marking progress (1) • Length of lessons (1) • Accessible (1)
	Interpersonal Aspect
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer engagement (10) • Peer learning (6) • General/Tutor support (12) • Support/encouragement for forming CoPs (5) • Engagement in CoPs (1)

Table 11. Positive aspects of Package 1 (Cohorts 3/4) continued

Assessment	Personal Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recap questions (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed/reaffirmed role of INCO (10)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General satisfaction (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confidence (11)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quizzes (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inspired to improve practice (8)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No exams (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowered (4)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No assignments (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraged (3)
	Wider sector
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programme respectful of sector (1)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotes professionalism in sector (1)

Table 12. Positive aspects of Package 2 (Cohorts 1/2)

Content	Interpersonal Aspect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good resources (22) • Informative (17) • Interesting/engaging (14) • Helpful/practical (12) • General satisfaction (11) • Comprehensible (11) • Comprehensive (2) • Relevant (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for peer learning/peer support/collaboration (29) • Engaging in CoPs (7) • Support for existing CoPs (1) • General support/support from tutor (10)
Delivery	Knowledge & Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to work at own pace (10) • Easy to navigate (6) • Accessible (2) • Time frame (9) • Online learning (2) • Assessment (5) • Manageable workload (3) • Can revisit lessons (1) • Aesthetics of slides (1) • Well-organised lessons (3) • General satisfaction (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New/updated existing knowledge (23) • Refreshed previous learning (29) • New ideas/strategies/skills (21); communication strategies (4) • Importance of collaborative practice (23) • Understanding of leadership styles/skills (14) • Understanding of inclusion (10) • Opportunities for reflection (3)
Personal Development	None
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased feeling of motivation/confidence (18) • Developed/reaffirmed role of the INCO (24) • Validation of current practice (1) • Importance of CPD (6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant could not list any positive aspect (2)

Table 13. Positive aspects of Package 2 (Cohorts 3/4)

Content	Delivery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informative (7) • Easy to follow (3) • Relevant/practical (4) • Concise (2) • Interesting (2) • General satisfaction (1) • Comprehensive (1) • Up-to-date (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Layout of content (3) • Easy to navigate (2) • Resources tab (1) • Asynchronous learning (2)
Knowledge & Learning	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New/updated previous learning (4) - Theories of leadership/leadership skills (3) • Guidance on My Inclusion Plan (6) • Refreshed/reaffirmed previous learning (8) • Importance of/opportunities for reflection (3) • New ideas (2) • Acknowledgement of previous learning/experience (1) • Plans to share new learning with colleagues (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General satisfaction (4) • Readings (3) • Variety of resources (2) • Videos (1)
	Interpersonal Aspect
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer engagement (2) • Peer learning (1) • Support (2)
	Personal Development
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed/reaffirmed role of INCO (9) • Increased confidence (5) • Increased motivation (1) • Encouraging (1)

Table 14. Positive aspects of Package 3 (Cohorts 1/2)

Content	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to follow (23) • Interesting/engaging (24) • Informative (24) • Comprehensive (5) • Relevant/up-to-date (22) • Concise (6) • General satisfaction (10) • Manageable workload (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General satisfaction (25) • Useful (7) • Easy to access (2) • Will share with staff/colleagues (9) • Good reading materials (7) • Satisfaction with videos (5); videos on conflict resolution (3)
Delivery	Knowledge & Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-presented content (4) • Good visuals (1) • Well-organised layout (8) • Easy to navigate (15) • Online learning (1) • Auto-release of units (5) • Asynchronous learning (12) • Time frame (9) • Variety of learning approaches (1) • Discussion forum (3) • Podcast (6) • Peer-led CoP sessions (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New learning/updated existing knowledge (35) • Child social-emotional development (16); brain development/functioning (5); role of environment/nature pedagogy (20); observing/ understanding/ supporting children's communication (18); supporting inclusion (3) • Refreshed/reaffirmed previous learning (44) • New ideas/strategies/tools (86) • Upskilling (3) • Opportunities for reflection (13) • Development of role of INCO (2)
Assessment	Application to Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General satisfaction (2) • No written assignment (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content beneficial to practice (39) • Learning will be/has been cascaded to colleagues (12) • Learning has been/will be applied to practice (6)
Interpersonal Aspect	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer engagement/ learning/support (30) • Formed own CoP (1) • General support/Tutor support (10) 	

Table 15. Positive aspects of Package 3 (Cohorts 3/4)

Content	Delivery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interesting (6) • Informative (4) • Practical (7) • General satisfaction (4) • Easy to follow (4) • Interesting quotations (1) • Relevant references (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Layout of content (3) • Online learning (1) • Easy to navigate (2) • Ability to work at own pace (2) • Variety of media (1) • Visuals (1) • Accessible (1)
Knowledge & Learning	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refreshed previous learning (3) • New/updated existing knowledge (7) • brain development (2); supporting transitions (1); nature pedagogy/ outdoor play (4); CoPs (1); risky play (1) • Strategies for understanding children's communication/ interactions/emotions (12) • Theories and strategies for supporting social and emotional development (15) • Strategies for conflict resolution (3) • New ideas (3) • Importance of collaborative practice (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General satisfaction (6) • Podcast (2) • Readings (2) • Videos (1)
	Interpersonal Aspect
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General support/Tutor support (1)
	Personal Development
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased confidence (2) • Importance of CPD (1)

Table 16. Aspects of Package 1 to change (Cohorts 1/2)

Content	Online Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetitive (23) • Drawn out (17) • Little new information/repeated content from main LINC Programme (12) • Not practical (7) • Not relevant (3) • Lacks clarity/cohesion (3) • Basic/patronising (1) • Not up-to-date/some aspects require further research (2) • Not interesting (2) • General dissatisfaction (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person preferred (5) • More opportunities for peer engagement/peer learning desired (4) • More support needed to engage with Package (1)
Delivery	CoP sessions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues with sound quality (1); tone of voice on recordings (1); pace of presentations (1); size of print (1) • Release units on Fridays instead of Mondays (2) and earlier in the day (2) • Release units in quicker succession (1) • Change time of year package is released (6); give longer to complete (3) • Reduce gap between packages (2) • LINC+ format should be the same as main LINC Programme (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More support using BigBlueButton (2025)/technology needed (7) • More support in relation to accessing/organising self-facilitated sessions (4) • Smaller/different group compositions for tutor-facilitated sessions (3) • More tutor-facilitated sessions (2) • Wider range of times for sessions (6) • Low engagement from students (3); participation should be mandatory (1) • Discussions lack focus (2) • General dissatisfaction/dislike of CoP platform (5)
	Resources
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More resources (5) • Shorter videos (2) • More practical videos (2) • Links to additional relevant reading desired (4)

Table 16. Aspects of Package 1 to change (Cohorts 1/2) continued

Assessment	Additional Supports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More approaches to assessment desired e.g., multiple choice quiz; written assignment (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued access to a mentor following the programme (2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on discussion post desired (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide summary materials from package 1 to bring back to setting (1)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More interactive games/word searches desired (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A helpline (1)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to discuss application of learning to practice desired (1) 	
Recognition	Nothing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation should be recognised with a formal qualification (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants stated they would not change anything (16)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide summary materials from package 1 to bring back to setting (1)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A helpline (1)

Table 17. Aspects of Package 2 to change (Cohorts 1/2)

Content	Time Frame
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetitive (6) • Drawn out (6) • Basic (4) • No/little new information (6) • Uninteresting (2) • Content directed at managers (1) • More practical examples/ideas/strategies desired (6) • More practical involvement of team in setting desired (2) • More Irish examples wanted (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quicker release of units (2) • Change time of year package is released (1) • Longer time frame needed (2) • Work-life-study balance difficult to manage (1) • Impact of COVID (1) • Break between units desired (1) • More reminders to complete units desired (1)
Resources	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More resources/videos (5) • Videos too long (1) • Less/shorter reading materials (5) • More reading materials desired (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Millionaire's quiz (4) • Crossword (2) • Word search (1) • Quizzes (1) • More quizzes desired (2) • Written assignment desired (1) • More opportunities to upload reflections desired (1)
Delivery	Recognition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person desired (2) • More opportunities for peer interaction (1) • Music on slides distracting (1); volume of voiceover too low (1) • Lessons too long (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring LINC Programme to Masters level (1)
	Support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater access to supports desired (1)
	Nothing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants stated they would not change anything (18)

Table 18. Aspects of Package 3 to change (Cohorts 1/2)

Content	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetitive (5) • Little new information/repeated content from LINC Programme (7) • Not relevant (3) • Too basic (11) • More detailed content desired (5) • Uninteresting (2) • General dissatisfaction (1) • More practical information/ examples/strategies (23) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More resources (4) • More readings (3) • Readings too long (2) • More videos (11); videos on nature pedagogy (1); Ireland-based videos (1) • More resources in Irish (1) • More lecture notes (1) • Resource on emotional vocabulary desired (1)
Delivery	Time Frame
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volume on lessons too low (3) • Tone of voice on recordings (2) • Pace of presentations too slow (2) • In-person element desired (6) • Greater role for tutor desired (1) • More opportunities for peer engagement/learning desired (7) • More podcasts desired (1) • More timeslots for CoP sessions (2) • More tutor-facilitated sessions (1) • More support navigating CoP platform needed (3) • More support in forming CoPs (4) • Dislike of breakout rooms (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular reminders from LINC to complete package (1) • More time needed (2) • Units/package too long (3) • Good resources (15)
	Assessment
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More quizzes (3) • Quizzes too simplistic (3)
	Additional Supports
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to follow-up mentoring (1) • Financial aid for settings (1)
	Nothing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants stated they would not change anything (40)

Table 19. Aspects of Package 1 to change (Cohorts 3/4)

Content	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less repetition (4) Content geared towards INCOs but not all LINC+ participants are INCOs (1) Less content (1) Units/lessons too long (3) Unit 4 slides contain too much content (2) Less work load (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some resources not relevant (1) Edited PDF slides of lessons for printing (1) More videos (4) More videos depicting different service types (1) One reading activity too long (1)
Delivery	Peer Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time frame (2) Time frame to complete units desired (1) Learning platform difficult to navigate (2) Cannot engage with programme using iPad (1) CoP platform text chat (1) Volume on some lessons too low (2) Lesson voice over monotonous (2) More slides with recap questions (1) Ability to rewind slides desired (1) Discussion forum difficult to access (2) Live Q&A session desired (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-person element desired (2) No one taking the lead on organising peer-led CoP sessions (2) CoP sessions should be compulsory (1) More support needed forming groups for CoP sessions (2) More opportunities for peer learning (1)
	Assessment
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity to write reflective piece upon completion of package (1) Drag and drop quizzes frustrating (1)
	Recognition
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater award upon completion (1)
	Nothing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change nothing (16)

Table 20. Aspects of Package 2 to change (Cohorts 3/4)

Content	Delivery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More practical examples/strategies (6) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > e.g., challenges faced by INCOs and solutions > e.g., more examples of/like My Inclusion Plan • Less repetition (2) • Differentiation between INCOs in management vs educator roles (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to pause/rewind clickable pop-ups on slides desired (2)
Time Frame	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce length of units/volume of content (3) • Provide timeline/deadlines for completion of units to prompt engagement (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissatisfaction with reading material (1) • Resource on emotional vocabulary desired (1)
	Documentation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish requirement for INCO to document how they fulfil their role (1)
	Nothing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants stated they would not change anything (3)

Table 21. Aspects of Package 3 to change (Cohorts 3/4)

Delivery	Time Frame
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to navigate (2) • Mixture of live online classes and recorded lessons desired (1) • Ability to speed up voiceover on lessons desired (1) • Volume of lessons too low (1) • More podcasts (1) • More videos (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide timeline/deadlines to encourage engagement (1)
	Nothing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants stated they would not change anything (6)

Appendix H:

LINC+ Continuing Professional Development Programme Team

The development, implementation and delivery of the LINC+ CPD Programme is undertaken by a host of dedicated personnel with expertise in programme design and management, adult and further education, online learning, inclusion, and early years education and care. The programme content was developed by a range of academics and experts in the fields of early childhood, inclusive education, and leadership.

Further to the members of staff and contributors listed below, the implementation and delivery of the LINC+ CPD Programme has been supported by part-time Assistant Tutors who assist with the delivery of the Communities of Practice (CoP) sessions, which are an integral aspect of the LINC+ CPD Programme; individuals on temporary contracts; and a range of staff across the LINC Consortium members, including the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development (LEAD) Centre and ICT Services at MIC. Whilst it is not possible to name all in this appendix, the LINC Consortium is indebted to a wide range of individuals across many offices and divisions in the consortium members, without whom this programme could not have been delivered.

LINC+ CPD Programme Team – Coordination, Student Support, Communications and Administration

- Claire Butterly, National Programme Coordinator (2024-)
- Shirley Heaney, National Programme Coordinator (2021-2024)
- Marie Doherty, Interim National Programme Coordinator (2019-2020)
- Irene Hegarty, Higher Executive Officer, Office Manager
- Isabel Walsh, Executive Officer, LINC Administrator
- Helena Thompson, Marketing, Communications & Recruitment Officer
- Dermot Comerford, Former Marketing, Communications & Recruitment Executive

LINC+ CPD Programme Team – Academic Support, Delivery and Research

- Denise Sheridan, LINC+ Tutor
- Lorraine Diggins, Acting LINC+ Tutor
- Claire Butterly, Former LINC+ Tutor
- Kathleen Dalton, Former Acting LINC+ Tutor
- Sharon Byrne, Former LINC+ Tutor
- Dr Linda Kelly, Researcher

LINC+ CPD Programme Team – ICT and LEAD Centre

- Niamh McNamara, Technology Enhanced Learning Designer (MIC)
- Amy Mitchell, Technology Enhanced Learning Designer (MIC)
- Tom Kinsella, Former Technology Enhanced Learning Designer (MIC-LEAD Manager)
- Stephen McFarlane, Former Technology Enhanced Learning Designer (Formally MIC)
- Jean Reale, Academic Developer (MIC)
- Geraldine Exton, Former Academic Developer (Formally MIC)
- Karen Walsh, ICT Systems Administrator (MIC)
- Niall Sheehy, Analyst Programmer

LINC+ CPD Programme and Package Content Development Team

- Karina Abbott (MIC-LINC)
- Milica Atanackovic (ECI)
- Mai Burke-Hayes (MIC)
- Claire Butterly (MIC-LINC)
- Sharon Byrne (Former MIC-LINC)
- Marie Doherty (MIC)
- Ann Donnellan (MIC-LINC)
- Racheal Govan (MIC-LINC)
- Paula Harte (MIC-LINC)
- Shirley Heaney (MIC)
- Dr Annette Kearns (MU-Froebel)
- Liz Kerrins (ECI)
- Linda Madden (MIC-LINC)
- Dr Lisha O’Sullivan (MIC)
- Prof. Emer Ring (MIC)
- Denise Sheridan (MIC-LINC)
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- Patsy Stafford (MU-Froebel)



