HEADSTART (Mature Student 'Prep for College' Programme) (Mary Immaculate College)

Key Features

1. Was the initiative established specifically to promote progression and retention and/or to address non-progression rates?

   Yes

2. Please state the institutional commitments or national priorities with which this initiative is aligned — for example, an institutional policy or strategic plan, an indicator in the institution's Performance Agreement under the System Performance Framework, and/or the National Access Plan?

   The initiative supports the following institutional commitments and national priorities:

   - National Access Plan target of increasing mature entrants from disadvantaged areas, as priority groups, and in addressing KPIs in relation to increasing diversity in Initial Teacher

Education, progression from Further Education (FE) to Higher Education (HE), Student Success and Engagement

- The initiative aligns with MIC's Strategic Plan, Pathway 2: Student Journeys, Transformation & Flourishing – "strengthen wellbeing and belonging, inclusion and confidence, transition pathways and access" and MIC's Student Success Framework, in being co-constructed with students, and encompassing peer mentoring.
- MIC Performance Agreement 2024–2028, Pillar 2: High Quality, Whole-Student Experience, Performance Objective 3: Access & Participation

3. Title of lead or section responsible for the initiative/measure

PATH 1 Manager

4. Focus

- First-year students
- New entrants
- Early intervention initiative
- Transition focus
- Targeted initiative (specific student cohort/faculty)
- Mature students

5. Theme

- Student wellbeing, experience, & success

Overview of Initiative

6. Briefly describe the initiative, with reference to

- Why, and when introduced
- Overview of activities/intervention
- Success to date & next steps.

The HEADSTART programme is targeted at incoming UG mature students. HEADSTART was developed to encourage prospective students to sustain their motivation to start their chosen course and allay any fears around commencing a HE programme. The programme supports student progression, retention and completion through fostering a sense of belonging within

participants from the outset, encouraging peer support amongst the mature student cohort, and promoting early engagement with key support services that will assist them to progress and succeed in HE.

The programme has run for two years, over one day, during the summer period. Activities include information sessions from college administration and support services, and workshops focused on building confidence, addressing imposter syndrome, and IT skills. The programme is co-delivered by current mature students, who provide a campus tour and ice-breaker activities and share their own experiences. Opportunities for informal relationship building with other students and staff are facilitated. Participation has grown from 11 in year 1 to 15 in year 2. The programme will be extended to the College's Thurles campus in 2026.

HEADSTART 2025 SCHEDULE		
Tuesday, 19th August 2025		
Time	**Content**	**Room**
9.30am	Welcome	T101
10.00am	Breakfast	Canteen
10.45am	Ice breakers	T101
11.00am	Registration	T101
11.15am	Fees	T101
11.30am	Break	T101
12.00pm	Financial Supports	T101
12.15pm	Mature student experience	T101
12.45pm	Peer Mentoring	T101
1:00pm	Lunch	Canteen
2.00pm	Tour of campus	SU/library/Tara
2.45pm	Confidence Building	T101
4.00pm	Q&A/Feedback	T101
4.15pm	Close	T101

Aims and Objectives

7. Aim of the initiative

To enhance student transition to and progression within Higher Education amongst the mature student cohort, through a proactive and inclusive programme, addressing belonging, confidence and skills for college. It also aims to provide information and guidance from, and early engagement with, key services, and initiate peer support systems.

8. Objective 1

To support mature students in their transition into Higher Education, particularly those from SED backgrounds.

Actions

Hosting the HEADSTART Programme during the summer. The content of the Programme addresses necessary skills and connections with peers to contribute to student success.

The Programme provides an opportunity for prospective students to:

- address any doubts and fears they have about attending HE, that may have been building since accepting their offer.
- familiarise themselves with MIC, its services and staff and be motivated to follow through and enrol.

Expected Outcome

Mature students feel confident in transitioning into their programme at MIC.

9. Objective 2

To support student progression and retention through fostering a sense of belonging, encouraging peer support amongst the mature student cohort, and promoting early engagement with key support services.

Actions

Introduction to key services and rapport building with key staff during the HEADSTART programme:

- Formally, in the form of presentations and workshops
- Informally, during breaks, over coffee/lunch

Expected Outcome

Mature students will have:

- established contacts within their own programme group prior to starting college, developing a peer support system amongst themselves and with other mature students in higher years;
- be confident starting college and will have started to develop a sense of belonging;
- ability to seek help earlier, thereby improving their participation, progression and success on their chosen programme.

Resourcing

10. How is the initiative resourced?

HEA PATH 1 funding was used to fund the Project, and it was developed and delivered by PATH 1 staff, with assistance from MIC staff from other departments for the workshops and delivered on the MIC Limerick Campus.

Monitoring & Oversight

11. How is the initiative monitored — is there a reporting structure in place or a committee where there is a monitoring of and reporting on progress and the achievement of objectives (e.g. academic council, university executive team)?

The programme is evaluated annually, and reports are submitted to the HEA, as part of the PATH 1 reporting requirements, and to MIC's Director of Student Life, who feeds into the Equality Committee and President's Report. Although the requirement to report to the HEA no longer exists, the evaluations will continue and the results will be reported on internally, and actioned as required, within MIC.

Data & Evidence of Impact

12. How do you know that the initiative is working as planned, i.e.
    - Are data gathered (ongoing monitoring and evaluation of achievement of objectives)?
    - Have the objectives been achieved? What data and evidence are there to support this?

Surveys/psychometric tools will be used to evaluate how the programme contributes to participants' sense of belonging and ability to seek help, including tools to measure mature students' general sense of belonging before and after transitioning into higher education (e.g. University Belonging Questionnaire (UBQ) or Yorke Sense of Belonging Scale).

Surveys conducted with participants to date show that participants' confidence in starting their programme increased by 31% in Year 1 and 35% in Year 2 post completion of the HEADSTART programme.

Enrolment, progression and completion rates will continue to be tracked.

The long-term impact for the first group will be seen in two years' time, at the point of graduation, when further research will be carried out with the students.

13. Has impact been established, and how? If not at present, how do you plan to gather data and evidence to establish impact?

In comparison with the wider mature student cohort, 84% of HEADSTART students progressed, whilst 77% of mature students who didn't attend HEADSTART have progressed.

100% of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students (PATH 1) who attended HEADSTART in 2024 progressed to Year 2 of their course.

The goal of HEADSTART is to increase Access (Registration), Participation (Retention) and Progression (Success) amongst mature students, in accordance with the National Access Plan and its focus on underrepresented groups, including mature students.

The programme is informed by participant feedback. Overall rating by participants of HEADSTART programme is 93% (Year 1) and 98.5% (Year 2).

Student Feedback:

"Thank you so much for running the programme, it was brilliant. I'm feeling way more together and confident starting college after taking part."

"The head start course gave me a better perspective of the college overall and what to be prepared for. I learned so much that I didn't know such as the resources and amazing supports that are available at MIC. The head start has answered so many questions for me and it was run very well. I am so glad I participated in it."

"I really enjoyed the programme, it was a great blend of wellbeing/confidence building/social icebreaker... and introduction to valuable resources and contacts. Honestly this programme has shown me how to navigate the library, all the supports available through the ALC, a feel for the tech used, being able to ask current students questions, practical information on financial supports and how to register. I will be starting college feeling more confident, I know where to go and who to ask for support. I enjoyed that it was in person as it's good to get a feel for campus and meet staff"

Future Plans

14. How do you intend to further develop or expand the initiative?

Feedback is sought annually, both immediately following the programme and at the end of students' first year, on the content and delivery of the programme, to ensure continuous improvement in each iteration of the programme and to ensure evidence-based decision-making. Co-creation with students is an important part of the development process.

Programme development:

- It is intended that there will be academic input in the next iteration of the programme based on participant feedback.
- HEADSTART will be extended to the MIC Thurles campus.

