



PPI IGNITE
NETWORK

IMPACT CASE STUDY

4

Empathy Detectives: Challenging the myths and stereotypes that surround diabetes

Who was involved?

- CÚRAM Research Ireland Centre for Medical Devices
- PPI Ignite Network Galway
- IdeasLab, University of Galway
- Diabetes Ireland
- 7 PPI contributors

Summary

Empathy Detectives has established a model for creating educational materials for junior cycle students about chronic health conditions that foster empathy and innovation and encourage young people to consider STEM subjects as potential career options.

The overarching goal of the project was to create meaningful educational resources that offer a unique and impactful approach to education. At the heart of the project's success is the active involvement of patients, carers, researchers and teachers in the design of these empathy experiences, resulting in the development of multidisciplinary tailored workshops aimed at Junior Cycle students that link with the curriculum.

Evaluation of the workshops showed that the activities were effective in reducing stigmatising beliefs, fostering empathy and increasing understanding of the lived experience. These resources have also been adapted into a lesson plan for use by secondary-school teachers nationwide in collaboration with Diabetes Ireland.

[A promotional video](#) explaining the purpose and outcomes of the project has been shared with funders at international conferences and through project partners' social media platforms to highlight the potential for applying a PPI approach in the co-design of science education resources.

Our work

Some evidence suggests that empathy levels are declining among younger generations and that levels of apathy and individualism are rising. The Empathy Detectives project was created to consider ways of encouraging young people to develop greater empathy, compassion, and prosocial behaviours towards all individuals and to peers living with and managing diabetes.



The aim of the project was to develop non-formal STEM learning opportunities that relate directly to the Junior Cycle science curriculum and promote wellbeing. The project team established a 7-member panel of PPI contributors living with diabetes or caring for a person with diabetes to co-create 'empathy experiences' that demonstrate real-life challenges for people living with diabetes. This panel contributed to decision-making and the co-creation of materials throughout the project lifecycle.

The PPI contributors were asked to share experiences about times when people have lacked understanding of and empathy for what it is like to live with diabetes to inform the design of 'empathy experiences'. The panel discussed what an empathy experience would look like, and how to translate personal experiences of living with diabetes into meaningful and engaging activities for Junior Cycle students. These real-life challenges were incorporated into learning materials through a process led by project partners at the IdeasLab (the University of Galway's student innovation hub) who have extensive experience in facilitating collaboration, idea-generation and the co-creation of design solutions amongst a diverse group of stakeholders.

The co-design process followed a structured human-centred design methodology. Lived experience narratives shared by PPI contributors were synthesised into key challenge themes, which were then translated into prototype activities. These prototypes were iteratively tested and refined with PPI contributors, educators and students to ensure fidelity to lived experience while aligning with curriculum objectives and developmental appropriateness.

The resulting workshop combines these empathy experiences with educational components and includes a myth-busting opening section that challenges diabetes stereotypes, a short video highlighting the biological processes implicated in diabetes, and facilitation of the self-management game

based on the popular children's game 'Ker-Plunk'.

In total, 713 people of all ages attended 36 Empathy Detectives workshops delivered at Galway City Museum and at The Galway Science and Technology Festival, during Engineers Week 2025 and in schools participating in CÚRAM's Teachers in Residence Programme. Post-workshop surveys were used to evaluate the impact of participation in the workshops on attendees' perceptions of diabetes and the level of satisfaction with their learning experience and the workshop materials.

In collaboration with Diabetes Ireland, the workshop content and empathy experience activities were adapted into a lesson plan specifically targeting both Junior Cycle students and older primary school children. The lesson plan will be distributed in 2026 through Diabetes Ireland and Scoilnet.

A promotional film was created for the purposes of promoting PPI in scientific research, engaging with audiences, and highlighting the project's success to funders. An evaluation of the PPI process throughout the project was also conducted.

Our impact

Co-designed empathy experiences reflect lived experience

The empathy experiences co-created by PPI contributors and the project team, using the University of Galway's IdeasLabs process, were approved and endorsed for inclusion in the educational workshops by PPI contributors. The PPI contributors felt that the empathy experiences directly reflected their goals and how they wanted the condition to be perceived. The empathy experience process is now a proven innovative approach that can be used by PPI practitioners to communicate lived experience effectively to researchers, policy makers and other stakeholders.



Educational materials based on co-designed empathy experiences change attitudes

Post-workshop surveys showed a shift in students' perceptions of diabetes away from a focus on diet to understanding about balancing life demands, emotional impacts, and a more holistic view of managing diabetes. These results demonstrate that educational materials based on empathy experiences are effective in changing attitudes.

Increasing awareness and empathy, challenging stigma

The post-workshop surveys showed an increased understanding and awareness of diabetes, increased empathy towards people living with diabetes, and changes in misconceptions of diabetes, showing that the workshop achieved its objectives of challenging stereotypes, increasing awareness and developing empathy. One such example is that there was a significant decrease in agreement with the statement that “*Only unhealthy people get diabetes*” across all groups who took part in the workshop, while the control groups had no significant changes, indicating that the workshop effectively challenges stigmatising views.

Co-created educational materials improve engagement and quality of learning in the Junior Cycle, supporting STEM education

Empathy-based learning materials improve engagement and quality of learning. Students reported the games/activities/challenges, learning about diabetes, and enjoyment and fun were the three “best things” about the workshop. Evaluation of the workshops also showed that the project works most effectively with the target audience of Junior Cycle students, with levels of disengagement observed in older age groups, indicating room for improvement in fostering empathy in sceptical audiences. These post-workshop evaluations demonstrate that the content and quality of the workshop were of a high standard, while revision of some topics may be necessary with older groups to address persistent misconceptions.

Sustainability: Broadening the reach

Having adapted the workshop materials to be specifically aimed at Junior Cycle and senior primary students, the potential audience increased. Partnering with Diabetes Ireland, Scoilnet and other organisations in Ireland helps to broaden the reach and use of the materials and the potential of increased impact in the future is significant.

Impacting PPI approaches

Findings from the evaluation of the PPI process guided CÚRAM when developing a PPI approach for its research programme and these learnings were incorporated into the establishment of a PPI panel for the Research Centre in November 2024. In addition to having a local impact, communicating the PPI approach and evaluation data through conference posters and the promotional video has shared this innovative approach more broadly, garnering interest across the PPI community.



PPI Panel for the Empathy Detectives project with project coordinators from CÚRAM, IdeasLab and PPI Ignite Galway



Students taking part in empathy workshop activities

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