



BEST RESEARCH PROJECT:

Availability of Cognitive Rehabilitation for People with Dementia in Ireland (CR-Ireland)



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National College of Ireland is a not-for-profit, HEA-funded, independent higher education institute, delivering programmes to doctoral level in Business, Computing, Education and Psychology in Dublin’s North-East Inner City. Psychology was first delivered as an honours degree at NCI 12 years ago, and the programme has delivered high-achieving graduates and high-impact research.

Dr Michelle Kelly is an Associate Professor of Psychology at NCI and co-directs the ProBrain Research Lab. Alongside her lecturing and research practice, Michelle is the Chair of the NCI Psychology Ethics Subcommittee, a member of the PSI Undergraduate and Postgraduate Accreditation Committees, and also a member of the Council (Board of Directors) for the PSI.

Dr Caoimhe Hannigan is an Associate Professor of Psychology at NCI and co-directs the ProBrain Research Lab. Caoimhe has significant experience in the design and implementation of research related to cognitive function, health and well-being in older populations. Her key research interests include modifiable risk factors for chronic health conditions and dementia, brain health and dementia prevention, successful ageing, and interventions to support health and well-being in older adults.

Background

Cognitive Rehabilitation is an evidence-based, cost-effective early intervention shown to improve goal attainment, functional ability, and quality of life for people living with mild to moderate dementia.

Despite strong international and national recommendations, including the HSE’s National Model of Care for Dementia (2023), Cognitive Rehabilitation has not been routinely available in Irish memory services, largely due to staffing and capacity constraints. Simultaneously, many masters/doctoral level trainee psychologists in Ireland are required to complete supervised clinical placements as part of their training, but the demand for placements in older adult services is often unmet.

This research project creates an innovative, novel service-delivery model for CR; simultaneously addressing workforce development and service provision. The pilot site was the Regional Specialist Memory Clinic at Tallaght University Hospital. Trainee psychologists, recruited from accredited postgraduate programmes, were trained and supervised to deliver GREAT-CR to people living with dementia in their own homes.

The project combined a complex intervention evaluation within an implementation science framework. A mixed-methods design was employed, including a quantitative pre-post intervention study with an embedded randomised N-of-1 experimental design, alongside a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of feasibility, acceptability, appropriateness, and sustainability of the placement model. This dual focus allowed us to generate high-quality evidence on both clinical outcomes and real-world implementation processes.

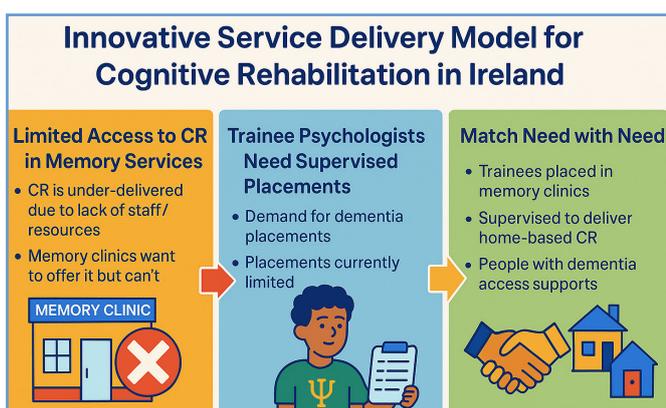
From an educational perspective, the project functioned as a structured, research-led training model, providing supervised clinical experience in an under-resourced specialty area, embedding evidence-based practice into professional training, and strengthening collaboration between higher education institutions and healthcare services.

Project objectives and desired outcomes

The primary objective was to pilot and evaluate a supervised placement model as a mechanism for increasing access to Cognitive Rehabilitation within Irish memory services. Educational and training objectives included recruiting, training, and supervising early-career psychologists to competently deliver an evidence-based dementia intervention, and establishing a replicable placement model aligned with postgraduate professional training requirements. Clinical and research objectives included delivering GREAT-CR to approximately 36 people living with early-stage dementia, and evaluating its impact on goal attainment, cognitive function, and quality of life using robust quantitative methods, including an embedded randomised N-of-1 design.

Implementation objectives focused on assessing the feasibility, acceptability, appropriateness, and potential sustainability of the placement-based delivery model from the perspectives of people living with dementia, family carers, trainees, supervisors, and service managers.

Desired outcomes included demonstrable improvements in personalised goal attainment for participants with dementia; evidence that CR can be delivered effectively by supervised trainees; high levels of acceptability among all stakeholder groups; enhanced placement capacity within memory services; and the production of evidence-based guidelines to support national scaling of the model.



Timescale, significant milestones and targets for completion

The project commenced in November 2023 and will conclude in November 2026. The active implementation and data-collection phase spanned approximately 24-months (after ethical approval and preparatory governance arrangements), and encompassed placement recruitment, intervention delivery, follow-up assessments, analysis, and dissemination.

Key milestones included the establishment of the pilot clinical site and governance structures at TUH; ethical approval from relevant hospital and academic committees; recruitment and training of trainee psychologists from Trinity College and University of Galway; students' completion of the Cognitive Rehabilitation training programme; recruitment of participants with dementia; delivery of Cognitive Rehabilitation interventions; completion of baseline, post-intervention and follow-up assessments; and collection of qualitative and quantitative implementation data.

Funding arrangements

The project was funded through The Alzheimer Society of Ireland's Dementia Research Award 2023. Funding supported research coordination, training and supervision infrastructure, data collection and analysis, and knowledge dissemination activities. The award enabled the establishment of the pilot site, supported trainee involvement, and facilitated collaboration across academic and clinical partners.



Project partners

The project was led by National College of Ireland, with Principal Investigators based within the Department of Psychology. The clinical partner was the Regional Specialist Memory Clinic in Tallaght University Hospital (TUH). Key academic collaborators included Trinity College Dublin, the University of Galway, Maynooth University, and the University of Exeter, contributing expertise in behavioural psychology, dementia care, and Cognitive Rehabilitation. Training resources were supported by the Dementia Services Information and Development Centre (DSIDC) at St James's Hospital, which hosted the rehabilitation eLearning programme.

Public and Patient Involvement contributors with lived experience of dementia were embedded throughout the project, informing design, procedures, ethical considerations, and dissemination. This multi-partner structure ensured strong alignment between education, research, and clinical practice.



Table 1:

Project deliverables: green indicates targets achieved to-date, orange indicates partially achieved; blue indicates targets to be achieved in the final 10 months of the project.

Deliverable Number	Deliverable	Month	Delivery Date
D1	Implementation Plan	1	30/11/2023
D2	Ethical Approval	2	31/12/2023
D3	Placement Practitioner (Students) Recruitment	3	31/01/2024
D4	Cognitive Rehabilitation Online Training	3	31/01/2024
D5	Placement Practitioner (Students) Training	5	31/03/2024
D6	Sample Recruitment (Quantitative Intervention Study)	10	31/08/2024
D7	Quantitative Intervention Dataset	13	30/11/2024
D8	Qualitative Implementation Dataset	15	31/01/2025
D9	Quantitative Implementation Dataset	14	31/12/2024
D10	Report and Implementation Guidelines	34	31/08/2026
D11	Conference Presentations	35	30/09/2026
D12	Scientific Publications	36	31/10/2026
D13	Knowledge Exchange Event	34	31/08/2026
D14	PPI Workshops 2	2; 31	31/05/2026
D15	Project Management Plan	1	30/11/2024

Targets for completion included training three psychology MSc students to deliver Cognitive Rehabilitation, with all students offering at least one course of rehabilitation each; 36 people with dementia consenting to participate in the intervention; successful delivery of Cognitive Rehabilitation to 36 people with dementia; completion of mixed-methods analyses; and production of tangible outputs including peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, inclusion in national/international policy reports, and a set of practical guidelines to support future implementation and scale-up.

Exceptional performance

Quantitative indicators of implementation effectiveness provide evidence of performance beyond expectations. Three practitioners were originally targeted for training; across the project, twelve practitioners were trained, representing 400% of target. Similarly, the target of three practitioners delivering at least one full course of Cognitive Rehabilitation was exceeded, with 11 practitioners achieving this (367% of target). Participant-related targets were more challenging: Thirty-six people living with dementia consented to receive the intervention, achieving 100% of target. Of these, over 90% successfully set personalised rehabilitation goals, and 75% completed the full course of Cognitive Rehabilitation. We consider this a strong completion rate given the clinical complexity of the population and the progressive nature of dementia. These figures reflect the effective implementation and high levels of acceptability among participants and families.

A major milestone was the inclusion of the project as a featured case study in the [World Alzheimer Report](#). This report is published annually by Alzheimer's Disease International (ADI), the global federation of more than 100 Alzheimer and dementia associations worldwide, which holds consultative status with the World Health Organization. The World Alzheimer Report is peer-reviewed, authored by leading dementia researchers, and is widely cited by national governments and international agencies, including WHO and UN bodies, to inform dementia strategies and policy frameworks. Inclusion in this report represents a significant endorsement of the project's innovation, relevance, and impact, and is noteworthy for National College of Ireland, as it positions the institution and the project team within a highly influential global evidence base.

Research outputs provide further evidence of exceptional

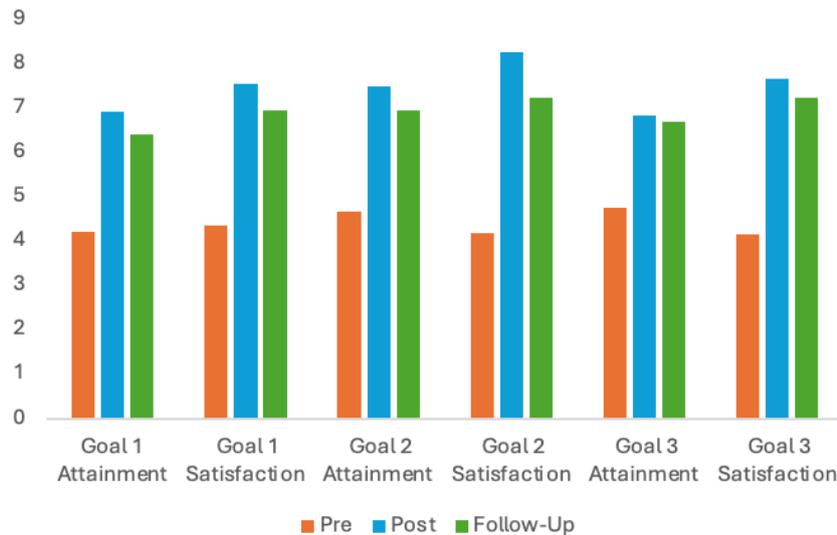
performance. One peer-reviewed, open-access publication arising from the project has already been published in [PLOS One](#), a high-quality international journal. In addition, four further peer-reviewed papers are currently in preparation: two qualitative papers examining implementation and stakeholder experiences, and two quantitative papers focusing on intervention outcomes and experimental design analyses. This volume and balance of outputs reflect both sustained research productivity beyond the minimum expectations of the funded project period.

Educational impact represents another significant milestone. One placement student used data collected during her supervised placement to complete her master's dissertation, conducting an experimental N-of-1 (single-case experimental) design study. This study met the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards for high-quality single-case experimental design research and, due to its randomised design, is classified as Level 1 evidence in support of the intervention. This outcome is exceptional in an educational context, demonstrating that the project not only generated high-quality research outputs but also enabled students to contribute meaningfully to the international evidence base while completing accredited postgraduate training.

Finally, the clinical and participant outcomes achieved by the project were uniformly positive. All participants who completed the intervention rated their goal performance and goal attainment as higher than baseline (see Figure 1). Every participant who completed the programme achieved success in the personalised goals they identified at the outset of the study. These outcomes are particularly noteworthy given the heterogeneity of dementia presentations and reinforce the effectiveness of Cognitive Rehabilitation when delivered through a supervised, research-led placement model.

Figure 1:

Combined goal-rating data for all participants. The graph shows participants ratings of their own performance and satisfaction on self-selected goals (3 per person).

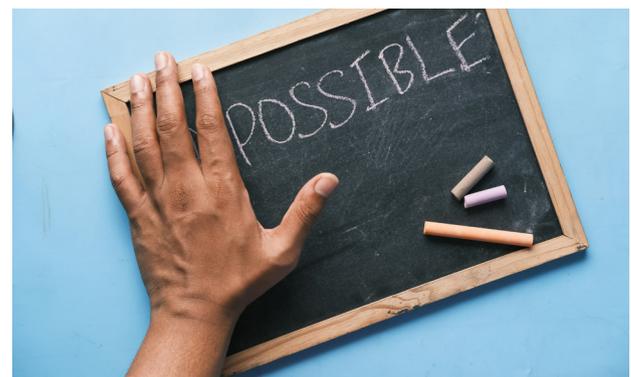


Overall, the project demonstrates exceptional performance across quantitative implementation indicators, educational innovation, methodological quality and international research impact. The project has generated meaningful training opportunities and tangible benefits for people living with dementia and their families, while positioning National College of Ireland as a contributor to globally influential dementia research and policy discourse. Future scaling-up of this vital service for people with dementia, informed by the evidence, guidelines, and partnerships developed through this project, will represent the final and most meaningful mark of success.

Partnerships and collaborations

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Challenges

Over the past 12 months, we encountered many challenges related to complex, real-world clinical research. These challenges were addressed through a combination of initiative, flexibility, and strong collaborative leadership. For example, the team secured a no-cost extension of the project, which proved critical in mitigating the impact of ethics and recruitment delays and allowed for a phased roll-out of placements and participant recruitment. This phased approach enabled continuous data collection and analysis, rather than a complete pause in activity, and supported the training of different student cohorts over time. We were lucky to have dedicated project staff, excellent support from the clinical team in the hospital and academics in partner institutions.

Further challenges arose in matching the intervention to the needs of participants with greater support needs, as outcomes tended to be strongest among those who were more mildly impaired with strong family support. These issues were addressed through close collaboration between placement practitioners, the memory clinic team, and families, supported by valuable input from Public and Patient Involvement contributors. Over time, we learned to set clear expectations with families at the outset, flexibly adapt intervention strategies to suit participant needs, and refer out to more appropriate services where necessary.

Despite challenges, the project has progressed successfully from the implementation to dissemination phase within the planned timeframe, demonstrating effective governance, adaptive leadership, and a resilient team.



Notable successes

- The research employed methodological approaches rarely achieved in applied educational-clinical projects, including a randomised N-of-1 single-case experimental design that meets the What Works Clearinghouse standards.
- Inclusion as a case study in the World Alzheimer Report demonstrates international recognition of the project's innovation, relevance, and impact at policy, service, and education levels.
- The project enabled early-career psychologists to complete supervised clinical placements that did not exist previously.
- Most importantly, the project supported people with dementia to access an evidence-based, highly recommended intervention that was not otherwise available.
- Finally, this research team is one of the only in Ireland to facilitate older adults with dementia to access educational/learning opportunities.

“I just felt it made me more conscious... that I had to be alert and awake, you know? And do the best I possibly can...”

“I’m just happy that there is a programme and that I’m doing something that I find is helpful to me, and that’s the most important thing.”

“I’m absolutely delighted that you’re giving me the opportunity to do this, and it is making me aware... there can be a problem there and you have to try your best - to try and remember things and like what you’re doing, which is great!”

