

# Steps+: Developing a New Career Guidance Platform in Oberstown Children Detention Campus

## Introduction

Oberstown is Ireland's national centre for the detention, care, and education of young people under 18 years referred by the courts on detention or remand orders. These young people usually face criminal charges of a serious or persistent nature. They often present with complex needs (Figure 1), including significant trauma histories of maltreatment, neglect, domestic violence, and familial substance misuse, often coupled with difficulties with mental health or speech and language, and challenging behaviour. In a recent study, 93% of participants reported exposure to three or more traumatic events (Ennis, 2023). Young people in Oberstown often require individualised and specialised multi-professional care and support.

School and educational attainment are important factors in determining whether a young person becomes involved in antisocial or criminal behaviour (Sutherland, 2011). Poor attendance or performance at school, and behaviour problems in the school environment, are influential on the pathway to youth offending in Ireland (Redmond, 2009; Oberstown, 2020). Early school exclusion is one of the strongest predictors, significantly associated with increased risk of involvement with drug abuse, antisocial behaviour, and further marginalisation in society (McCrystal et al., 2007). School exclusion before age 12 increases the odds of imprisonment by age 22 by a factor of four (McAra & McVie, 2010).

In line with legal requirements, Oberstown meets the needs of young people in relation to their care, education, health, offending behaviour, and preparation for leaving: the five elements of CEHOP®, the Oberstown model of care (Figure 2). Through a rights-based model, young



**Bernadette Walsh**

Guidance Counsellor and Researcher,  
CareersPortal



**Dr Yvette Ennis**

Steps+ Project Lead, Oberstown

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**Skills, Training, Education and Person-Centred Support Project (Steps+)** is a new, innovative career guidance platform developed for the young people and staff in Oberstown Children Detention Centre. It was designed collaboratively with key stakeholders through a three-year action-research pilot project. This article describes the platform's development.

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people participate in decision-making about their care, their lives, and the campus. Oberstown recognises the transformative power of education and its potential to affect the likelihood of positive outcomes for young people in conflict with the law. Many young people in Oberstown come with negative school experiences.

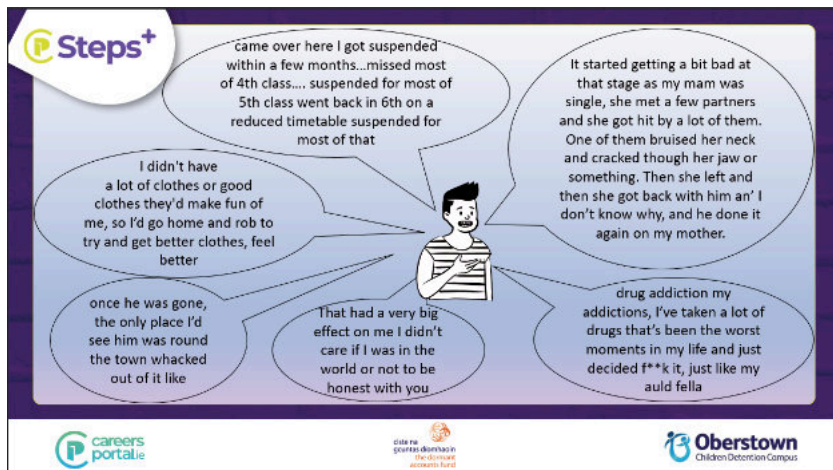


Figure 1: Voices of some young people

Oberstown knows that further education, training, and employment opportunities are significant in preventing further offending, so it collaborated with CareersPortal to develop Steps+, an inclusive careers education platform that aims to interrupt the pathway to a future cycle of offending.



Figure 2: CEHOP model

## CareersPortal

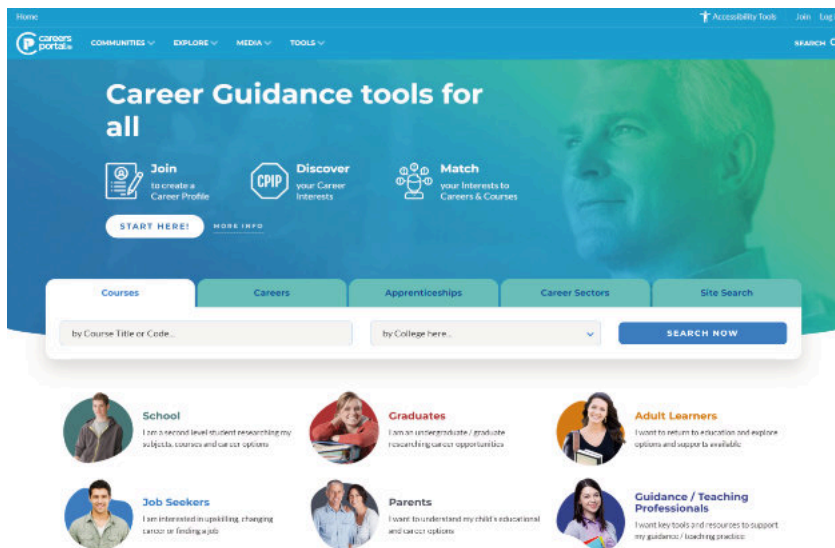


Figure 3: Careersportal.ie website

Launched in 2008 by the Minister of Education, the CareersPortal.ie website is a national one-stop careers information portal, providing up-to-date and relevant information and resources to those needing or providing career guidance (Figure 3).

The site supports second- and third-level students, parents, adult learners, job seekers, and guidance and teaching professionals. CareersPortal collaborates with educational providers and key public and private organisations to include the most up-to-date labour-market information. The 33 most prominent industry sectors are profiled, integrating occupations, skills shortages, educational pathways, sector news, associated articles, videos, and live jobs.

The need emerged to develop bespoke career-guidance programmes. REACH+ is a senior cycle guidance programme, and MyFuture+ is integrated in further education and public employment services. They support guidance counsellors, career professionals, and educators to support their students, adult learners, clients, and jobseekers.

## Steps+ project

With its expertise in developing tailor-made career guidance systems in a range of contexts, CareersPortal achieved Dormant Accounts Funding for a three-year pilot phased action-research project from April 2021 to March 2024. The

Skills, Training, Education and Person-Centred Support Project (Steps+) is a new, innovative career-guidance platform developed for the young people and staff in Oberstown. It aims to support young people to:

*understand their options and different paths to work, to plan the steps they need to take, and to get from where they are to where they want to go; be inspired about new opportunities they might not have known about (or that might not exist yet), or thought they could not achieve; understand their own knowledge and skills and how they can be used in the workplace; get, hold and progress in a job, whatever their age, ability or background; increase the amount they earn across their working lives; improve their well-being through doing a job they are good at and enjoy. (DfE, 2017, p.5)*

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*Oberstown strives to ensure that young people are supported to move away from offending behaviour and to make a more positive contribution to society.*

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Steps+ seeks to address the gap in appropriate career-guidance provision for the young people at Oberstown. Each young person is assigned a key worker: a residential social childcare worker who supervises them and gives them one-to-one guidance. Oberstown strives to ensure that young people are supported to move away from offending behaviour and to make a more positive contribution to society.

The CEHOP model adopted in Oberstown is holistic in response to young people's needs. The Steps+ platform aims to enhance this person-centred model to support the young people in their career learning and to access meaningful education and employment opportunities. ICT career-guidance-assisted systems can be effective in encouraging career learning and development, underpinned by models of career guidance (Walsh, 2016).

## Developing Steps+

The project has been shaped and developed in response to the emerging needs of all stakeholders. An action-research approach was adopted in gathering feedback through consistent consultation with the young people and staff on campus, senior management, and parents and guardians. This has influenced next steps, new developments, and project activities throughout all phases. Researchers have consulted with over 100 staff and 70 young people to date. Action research entails collaborative self-evaluation, whereby practitioners reflect on their work and identify areas that need reconsideration and possible improvement in dialogue with others (Darbey et al., 2013).

It became evident at an early stage that there was a need for strengths-based career assessments that built confidence, self-esteem, and meaningful opportunities for the young people to establish viable career-progression pathways.

As this new programme has evolved, the development team have taken an innovative approach to accommodate the diverse needs of young people on campus. The platform has accessibility tools that allow the young people to change the integrated activities into any language, use voice-to-text features for literacy challenges, and other tools that support differing abilities, including auditory and visual challenges.

Gysbers (2013) writes that career-ready young people have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to map and plan for their futures. Steps+ is an opportunity for these young people to look at their options and consider next steps that they previously may have struggled to be ready for and to access.

The project also showcases the important work of the campus and the careers on offer in Oberstown. On 11 October 2023 the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) hosted an information day on funded projects on campus, including Steps+ (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Steps+ development and research team with Minister O'Gorman at DCEDIY Steps+ information day

The project is being extended because of its success to date, and because of the need to examine how it can best support young people to transition successfully from Oberstown. The next phase involves developing features to provide access to online training, a repository for young people's certificates and CVs, career-assessment results, and so on, to support them on their career journey.

A new pilot research project aims to support up to 18 young people as they transition from Oberstown, irrespective of their legal status. It is aligned to the strategic objectives of Oberstown (Oberstown, 2022–2026) and Youth Justice Strategy (Department of Justice, 2021–2027). It is envisaged that this project will inform future policy on education with youths who are in conflict with the law.

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