# Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

**National College of Ireland**

**Research Students Declaration Form**

***(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)***

**Name: Alison Delahunt**

**Student Number: x14101378**

**Degree for which thesis is submitted: Masters in Arts in Learning and Teaching**

**Material submitted for award**

(a) I declare that the work has been composed by myself.

(b) I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.

(c) My thesis will be included in electronic format in the College Institutional Repository TRAP (thesis reports and projects)

(d) **Either** *I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

**Or** *I declare that the following material contained in the thesis formed part of a submission for the award of

_____

(*State the award and the awarding body and list the material below)*

**Signature of research student:** _____

**Date:** _____

**Submission of Thesis to Norma Smurfit Library, National College of Ireland**

Student name: _____ Student number: _____

School: _____ Course: _____

Degree to be awarded: _____

Title of Thesis:

_____

_____

_

_____

_

One hard bound copy of your thesis will be lodged in the Norma Smurfit Library and will be available for consultation. The electronic copy will be accessible in TRAP (http://trap.ncirl.ie/), the National College of Ireland's Institutional Repository. In accordance with normal academic library practice all theses lodged in the National College of Ireland Institutional Repository (TRAP) are made available on open access.

I agree to a hard bound copy of my thesis being available for consultation in the library. I also agree to an electronic copy of my thesis being made publicly available on the National College of Ireland's Institutional Repository TRAP.

Signature of Candidate: _____

For completion by the School: The aforementioned thesis was received by_____Date:_____

This signed form must be appended to all hard bound and electronic copies of your thesis submitted to your school

# Laying the Foundations: Transitional Experiences of Mature Students in an Irish Further Education Setting

**Alison Delahunt**

**National College of Ireland**

**M.A. Learning and Teaching** **2016**

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research to my parents Bernard and Gráinne who, through their own dedication and hard work have continually inspired me to become the best that I can.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank the following people for their wonderful help and guidance with my research.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Leo Casey for his continued support and guidance over the past two years. You have inspired me to continue with my learning journey.

I would also like to thank Dr. Arlene Egan and Dr. Laura Costelloe for their continued support and encouragement with my research.

To Alan, thank you for your continued love, support and tolerance during this time.

Thank you to my siblings, Fionnuala, Mick and Eddie who have supported me in many ways throughout this research. I look forward to spending more time with you all.

Finally, thank you to my wider family, friends and colleagues who have all supported and encouraged me over the past two years.

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the transitional experiences of mature students in an Irish Further Education (FE) setting. In exploring my research area, I decided upon two main areas for focus including; the motivation of mature students coming to FE as well as the first-term challenges experienced amongst mature students in relation to, confidence, assessments, digital competence and learning with younger peers.

Qualitative research was the adopted methodology for this study. Semi-structured interviews were the chosen data collection method as they facilitated an in depth exploration of my areas of interest. Non-probable purposive sampling was used to recruit eight participants who were studying in Further Education at the time. Open-ended questions were used to ensure that the interviews kept in close alignment to the research questions throughout

The findings in this study suggest that participants were both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to come to FE, with all participants indicating towards passion and interest for their subject area. In addition, participants indicated that a trigger of some form (such as unemployment) was responsible for leading them to FE at this point in time. Additionally, this study revealed other insights into the mature learner transition including; a fear of academic failure, lack of foresight about the workload, feelings of digital incompetence as well as tensions experienced when learning alongside younger peers. The findings of this research provides educators,

providers of education and other stakeholders interesting insights into the area of transition for mature learners in an FE context.

It is important to note that while these findings have accurately represented the accounts of eight participants, they cannot be deemed representative of the mature learner population. This research was refined to one college, and so was not comparable with other FE settings.

**Key words:** transition/al experiences, mature learners/students, further education, FE, Ireland, higher education, educators, teachers, support/s, adult education, participation, lifelong learning, motivation, tensions, younger peers.

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **BTEA** | Back to Education Allowance |
| **BTEI** | Back to Education Initiative |
| **DES** | Department of Education and Skills |
| **ESRI** | Economic and Social Research Institute |
| **ETB** | Education and Training Board |
| **EU** | European Union |
| **FE** | Further Education |
| **FET** | Further Education and Training |
| **FETAC** | Further Education and Training Awards Council |
| **HE** | Higher Education |
| **LCA** | Leaving certificate applied |
| **NQF** | National Qualifications Framework |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| **QQI** | Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland |
| **PLC** | Post Leaving Certificate Course |
| **SOLAS** | Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna |
| **VEC** | Vocational Education Committee |
| **VET** | Vocational Education and Training |
| **VTOS** | Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme |

## Table of Contents

# Chapter 1- Background and context

## 1.1 Introduction

This research seeks to explore the transitional experiences of mature students coming to Further Education (FE) for the first time. The transition to education is an important time for students, particularly mature students who are often returning to education after some time and who may have negative former learning experiences. I set out to investigate the experiences and dispositions of mature students in order to understand what motivated them to return to learning. In addition, I also wanted to find out if any challenges arose for mature students during their first term in FE. I decided to focus on challenges relating to academic confidence, assessments, digital competence and learning with younger peers. These areas presented as challenging during the pilot phase of my research and warranted further investigation in the present study. The first term is crucial in terms of adjustment into college life and may well influence a student's decision to remain on a course or not (Tuckman & Kennedy, p. 479). According to Liston et al. (2016), seventeen per cent of full-time mature entrants dropped out of Higher Education (HE) in Ireland during the first year in 2012/2013. While there is no official database that informs us of FE dropouts, it is useful to draw upon the figures in HE as a guide.

In addition to catering for the needs of young school leavers, the FE sector in Ireland is also responsible for offering a "second-chance education for people who did not complete upper second-level" education (Department of Education and Skills (DES, p. 20). This means that increasingly mature learners are coming to FE as a means of re-

engaging with formal learning. In the FE sector a mature student is anyone aged 21 or over, whilst in HE, a mature learner is anyone 23 years or older. Although those aged 21 are considered to be mature students, there doesn't appear to be any notable differences between these "younger" mature students and those in their late teens and early twenties. In an effort to avoid capturing students who remain in an extended adolescence, I have decided to focus only on those who are aged 28 years or older in my study. Most mature students in FE are in their late twenties and early thirties and so it was important to capture students in this age range and beyond. I also wanted to make sure that I would have access to an appropriate number of participants, as without this, the research could not have taken place.

Mature students are often referred to as "non-traditional" (Dwyer, 2013, p. 30) in that they differ from the general population of "traditional" learners. Traditional learners are considered to be those who have come to college straight from secondary school and followed the usual route into college via the Central Applications Office (CAO). With increasing participation rates over the last number of years, Dwyer (2013) highlights the increasing need to turn our attention to mature students in HE (p. 30). This may also be true of FE, where mature students represent approximately half of the student population (Hardiman, 2012, p. 1).

The Further Education sector in Ireland provides education for those who have left or completed second level schooling, and may not have achieved the desired requirements to progress straight into third-level education. In addition, the FE sector attracts those who are returning to learning after some time away from schooling and in many ways

it acts as a second chance for those who may not have engaged in further learning previously.

In Ireland, there has been some valuable research that deals with the mature student experience in the HE sector (Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Lynch, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999), however there has been little focus of mature learners in the FE setting. One important piece of research carried out by Hardiman (2012) deals specifically with the mature learner experience in the Irish FE sector and will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3 of this study. Unlike existing research in FE, the present study places particular emphasis on the first term and seeks to uncover any challenges experienced during this time. As previously mentioned, the first term is significant for mature students in terms of settling in and adjusting to college life. A deeper insight into the first term may inform the future practice of educators and may also help to optimise the overall student experience in post-secondary colleges.

The mature student population can be situated within the wider context of lifelong learning, which recognises and promotes all forms of learning (formal and non-formal) taking place in society. In order to fully live up to the expectations of lifelong learning, we must as educators, engage in continual scrutiny of our past, present and future practices in order to maintain the highest level of excellence within the realm of education. A report by the EU commission found that 7.6% of those aged 25-65 years in Ireland were participating in lifelong learning in 2013. This participation falls below the EU average of 10.5% for the same year and significantly lower than the benchmarked 12.5% EU figure for 2010 (European Commission, 2011, p. 16). With

aims to have a participation rate of 15% in lifelong learning by 2020 (The Expert Group on Future Skills Needed (EGFSN), 2014, p. 1) some more work has to be done to increase the levels of adults who are participating and staying in both formal and non-formal education. One important factor we must consider when looking at retention in education is integration, be it social, academic, cultural and so on (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). A lack of integration in the first year for mature learners can significantly influence their likelihood of staying in and succeeding in formal education (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). If we are to try to ensure participation and retention amongst this particular cohort within our formal education structures, we must examine all areas closely and on an ongoing basis to try and keep as up-to-date with the various schools of thought surrounding the field of adult education.

This research was carried out in a FE college that is located north of Leinster.
I have been a teacher in this college for the past year. The college mostly provides QQI level 5 and 6 courses across an array of departments including; Art, Design and Technology; Business, Humanities and I.T; Sport, Leisure and Tourism; Community and Health Care and Applied Science. The research participants include students who are participating in this college on level 5 courses.

The research undertaken as part of this study is of great interest to me as an educator in the FE sector. In addition, this research may serve to be of benefit to my colleagues, management as well as other educators in FE. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to the future development of the college as well as the continual development of the Irish FE sector.

This study will attempt to understand the motivation of mature students in coming to FE and the challenges faced in relation to a number of specific areas including: confidence, assessments, digital competence and learning with younger peers. The next chapter will include a literature review of the areas relevant to my enquiry and provide a wider context for this research to be situated in.

# Chapter 2- Literature review

## 2.1 Introduction

The research questions pertaining to this study are: What motivated mature students to come to FE for the first time and do they experience significant challenges in the first term in relation to, confidence, assessments, digital competence and learning with younger peers? This chapter will present a critical review of the literature relevant to my inquiry. The review is laid out in four parts. Firstly, my research question, although relevant to the broad area of adult learning, is situated within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland. I will therefore provide a brief background and current review of this area. The second part involves a review of the concepts of lifelong learning and transition, and their relevance to adult education. The third part addresses a further two concepts: motivation and its role in adult learning and the concept of the mature student in education. Lastly, this review will evaluate existing transitional supports for mature learners and consider their use in an Irish FE setting.

## 2.2 Vocational Education and Training in Ireland

On behalf of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), McGuinness et al. (2014) carried out a review of the FE sector in Ireland that looked at its past, present and future stance. They outline key milestones in the establishment of Ireland's Vocational Education sector in Ireland. Some of the milestones mentioned include the 1889 Technical Instruction Act, which supported the application of science and art to industry as well as the establishment of the City of Dublin Technical School, Kevin

Street, in 1885. The Dublin Corporation and other stakeholders set up this school as a response to concerns about the lack of technical training available. These concerns continued into the late nineteenth century, resulting in the transformation of some pre-existing educational institutions into technical schools (McGuinness et al, 2014, p. 9).

Further advances were made when the Vocational Education Act was signed into law in 1930. This saw the establishment of thirty-eight Vocational Education Colleges (VECs) across Ireland, that were set up as a response to high levels of unemployment. The services offered by the VEC's were mostly focused on the development of "technical, domestic science, commercial and rural skills" (McGuinness et al, 2014, p. 10). The VEC's introduced a Group Certificate, which was a vocational examination taken after three years of study in a vocational school. Two other state examinations existed at this time, the Intermediate Certificate, which was taken after three years in post-primary education, and the Leaving Certificate, which was generally taken two years later (Buck & McGinn, 2005, p. 7). The Group Certificate was considered as academically inferior to both the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations, and tended to mostly attract people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Hannan and Boyle, 1987). The lack of academic provision by the VEC's became open to scrutiny in the 1950's, and as a response, in 1966, many VEC's started to provide the Intermediate Certificate in addition to their existing Group award (McGuinness et al, 2014 p. 11). Despite efforts to increase diversity, people from lower-class backgrounds continued to heavily occupy the VEC's whilst the provision of scholarly education remained mostly exclusive to those who attended church-run or private fee paying schools (Hardiman, 2012, p. 12).

## 2.3 Further Education and Training in Ireland

The term "Further Education" was first introduced in the 1995 White paper on Education (DES, 1995, p. 76). Hardiman (2012) outlines how "Further Education" (FE) and "Adult Education" are often used interchangeably and can cause confusion in this regard. Furthermore, the term Further Education and Training (FET) is also used as a means of describing the post-primary sector in Ireland. According to Irelands Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS, 2014), "FET provides education and training and related supports to assist individuals to gain a range of employment, career, personal and social skills and qualifications at Levels 1-6 on the NFQ or equivalent". Broadly speaking, FET includes all further education and training in its definition whereas the term FE specifically refers to providers of Post Leaving Certificate Courses offered in colleges of Further Education in Ireland.

The FET sector emerged as a new division in the Irish education system and assumed responsibility for the "coordination of adult education, apprenticeships and Post Leaving Certificate education" (Hardiman, 2012, p. 7). It occurs after secondary school but is not regarded as part of the third-level system. The FET sector previously consisted of thirty-three VECs as well as other trades based apprenticeship services, most recently known as the Education and Training Authority (FAS). Both the VEC's and FAS were responsible for educating and training people for work, with the aim of reducing unemployment to meet the needs of the economy (SOLAS, 2015, p. 4). Both the VEC's and FAS worked separately and were disjointed in this regard (SOLAS, 2014.). In 2013, the SOLAS body was signed into law and both the VEC's and FAS were now dissolved into one entity. Sixteen new regional Education and Training

Boards (ETBs) were established in 2013 to replace the thirty-three VEC's that formerly existed. This re-arrangement was needed to close the gap in unemployment by up-skilling or re-skilling people for entry or re-entry to the labour market (SOLAS, 2014).

The FET sector offers Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) awards at levels 1-6 and provides access for some to higher education through the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS). All QQI awards are measured off the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), a framework that aims to facilitate easy recognition of qualifications, for the purposes of progression for the learner as well as "reinforcing and supporting the national policy approach towards the creation of a lifelong learning society" (Framework Implementation Network, 2016).

There is no formal statistical database for student numbers in the FET sector however The National Adult Learning Organisation, (AONTAS) estimate that "there are approximately 300,000 adults involved in formal, further education programmes" (2016). This includes individuals who are engaged in adult literacy programmes, community education, Youthreach, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), PLC programmes and Senior Traveller Training Centres (AONTAS, 2016).

The FET sector provides knowledge, skills and training to its learners, and has featured as a key player in reducing unemployment over the past number of years. There is a dearth of research surrounding FET, which is surprising when we consider its increasing contribution to education over the last number of years. Mature learners are

particularly under-researched in FET, even though they account for approximately half of the student population (Hardiman, 2012, p. 1). With numbers steadily rising, it is important to research mature learners in their own right. The present study will try to bridge the gap somewhat by carrying out an exploration of transitional experiences for mature learners engaging in an FE college in Ireland.

### 2.4 Access

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007), the main objectives of the FET sector are to " meet the needs of young early school-leavers", to "provide second-chance education for people who did not complete upper secondary education" and to offer "vocational preparation and training for labour market entrants and re-entrants" (p. 20). Full-time services include: Youthreach, which caters for 15-20 year olds, Traveller programmes for those over 15 years and Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses that are open to anyone 16 years or older and are accredited at levels 5 and 6 on the NFQ (DES, 2000, p. 85). Other areas of progression within the ETB's can be seen through the provision of a Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) that was established in 1989 to provide one year full-time education to anyone 21 years or older who has been unemployed for a year or more. Similarly, the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) was set up in 2002 to support adults who have not achieved their leaving certificate or who are in receipt of the social welfare benefit and are looking to engage in a part-time course. Other part-time FET options include: informal community based courses for adults wishing to engage with lifelong-learning, literacy and numeracy courses for adults, as well as language courses for migrants and other adults who are looking to improve their proficiency. These

initiatives aim to promote and draw adults towards both informal and formal learning in Ireland (Hurley, 2015, p. 17).

Over 38,000 people were registered in full-time PLC courses in the FET sector in Ireland in 2009/2010 (DES, 2000, p. 2). There are approximately 225 Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) providers in Ireland, and they are mostly situated in secondary schools or specialised "further education" (FE) colleges throughout the country (Watson et al, 2006, p. 1). The present study was carried out in a FE college offering PLC's courses at levels 5 and 6.

Entry to PLC courses is sought locally through the regional ETB's unlike in HE where applicants must apply via the Central Applications Office (CAO). Most of the school-leavers engaging in a PLC course have completed their Leaving-Certificate or Leaving-Certificate Applied, however this is not always the case (Watson et al, 2006, p. 1). In addition, there are high numbers of mature students engaging in PLC courses, to perhaps gain the knowledge and skills for work or to progress further in education.

The Irish FE sector is quite limited in terms of access streams to HE. There are some Universities and Institutes of Technology (IT's) connected with the FE sector, however places remain quite limited and do not necessarily align with the number of FE students wanting to progress further. The Higher Education Links Scheme provides PLC students who have obtained a level 5 or level 6 qualification with the opportunity to apply to a participating third-level university in Ireland. Watson et al. (2006) outline

that although “about one third of PLC leavers do go on to third level education”, PLC courses act more as an alternative rather than a direct route to HE (p. 26).

The UK, in comparison, has placed a significant emphasis on Access courses in their national strategy, and offer a wide variety of routes to HE. Unemployment, urban problems and race issues have all played a part in steering the government towards widening participation, with nine-hundred Access programmes available by 1994 (Hardiman, 2012, p. 14). This may explain why there is anecdotal “evidence to suggest that many PLC colleges have developed links with UK higher education institutions” and why many PLC students progress to third level colleges in the UK each year (Watson et al, 2006, p. 2).

**2.5 Lifelong learning**

Broadly speaking, lifelong learning is defined as “the process of learning which occurs throughout life” (Jarvis, 1990, p. 203). The concept of lifelong learning does not stem from a particular country; rather it is a policy idea that has been developed globally (Jakobi, 2009, p. 167). Carter (2008) outlines that educator and philosopher John Dewey first introduced the concept of lifelong learning in the early twentieth century. Dewey (1959) believed that education was a communal and continual process through which one would prosper and benefit from.

International organisations such as The United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) and The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have made significant contributions to the lifelong learning

agenda over the last number of decades. The publication of the Faure report (1972) "learning to be" and the latter Delors report (1996) "Learning: the treasure within" are key publications in the history of lifelong learning. The more recent Delors report states how "education is at the heart of both personal and community development" and how it is the responsibility of education to "enable each of us without exception to develop all our talents to the full and to realize our creative potential, including responsibility for our own lives and achievement of our personal aims" (p. 17). In addition the OECD's meeting on "lifelong learning for all" has played an important role in developing a policy framework for implementing lifelong learning (OECD, 1996). These organisations provide the platform from which the concept of lifelong learning has become internationally recognised, discussed and developed.

From an Irish perspective, the White paper on learning for life by the Department of Education and Science (DES) outlines that all learning taking place must be acknowledged regardless of its setting or whether it is done so formally, non-formally or informally (DES, 2000, p. 9). Much of the lifelong learning discussion focuses on the need for social inclusion for all citizens as well as the "learning needs and potential contribution of older learners" to the knowledge economy (DES, 2000, p. 69). While this may be the case, the DES point out that the "early school experience" needs to be of more concern to the national agenda in order to unify inter-sectoral approaches towards a lifelong learning policy (DES, 2000, p. 69).

The DES (2000) suggest a "proactive" approach to lifelong learning and outline that the labour market demands should drive the national policy. Such an approach

includes: monitoring the impact of education and training to the economy, continuing to provide education and training to those already in the workforce and developing programmes for people who are looking to enter or re-enter the workforce (such as "women in the home, long-term unemployed or those aged over 60 currently out of the workforce or who may wish to re-enter it" (p. 123)).

The FET sector in Ireland is unique in that it is situated between secondary and higher education, and is often considered the middle ground in this regard. It is a "first choice" for education and training for many "school leavers, employers and others" (SOLAS, 2014, p. 19). In addition, FET also serves those have not completed secondary level schooling with a "second chance" to reconnect with education (SOLAS, 2014, p. 20).

There has been a significant rise in adult learning since the economic recession in Ireland in 2008. In 2001, approximately 100,000 adults were engaged in FET in Ireland (AONTAS, 2012, p. 4). By 2012, it was estimated that this number grew to "approximately 300, 000" (AONTAS, 2012, P. 4). This rise is attributed to the fact that many people became unemployed during the recession and was left with little option other than to gain the knowledge and skills needed to re-engage with the workforce.

Another factor that has contributed to the rise in lifelong learning is the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) initiative. RPL is defined as: "the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged" (The National Quality Authority Ireland (NQAI), 2005, p. 2). RPL was introduced to "encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education,

leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what is already known of the course curriculum" (p. 3) This mirrors the concept of lifelong learning and facilitates accessible pathways for individuals into all forms of learning (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009, p. 3).

**2.6 Concept of transition**

Historically, the idea of transition has been conceptualised by a number of theorists as a series of predictable age linked periods that a person goes through, (Brofenbrenner 1979; Levinson, 1978; Gould 1978; Sheehy 1974). Whilst these psychological interpretations of transition do provide a base for understanding, they are somewhat out-dated and over simplistic in modern times. From an educational perspective, Jack Mezirow, an American sociologist and educator spoke about transition as a time where learners discover, question and engage in real negotiation of their identities, (Mezirow et al, 1978). In later years, Mezirow conceptualized and labeled the experiences of learners in education through his "transformational learning theory", (Mezirow, 1991a), a theory that describes ten steps adults go through when re-engaging with learning, (Mezirow, 2000, 2009). In addition, Mezirow highlighted how education spurs adults to reflect upon and question their existing dispositions, perceptions and assumptions, which in turn often leads to changes in these prior meanings and belief systems, (Mezirow, 1990).

In more recent years, the idea of transition has predominately centred around those in their younger years who are undergoing transitions from school to college or work, however with recent changes to the educational agenda, this description is no longer

satisfactory, (Fragosa et al, 2013, p. 68). A variety of factors including globalisation, labour market demands, changes to employment prospects as well as changes to the educational agenda (Fragosa et al, 2013, p. 68), mean that the previous trajectories of life are no longer straightforward and do not capture the real complexities of the educational population. The concept of lifelong learning has also played a key role in extending the earlier notions of transition beyond the younger years to something that occurs both formally and non-formally throughout the entire life cycle. As Fragosa et al (2013) outline, the course of modern life is now represented by regular periods of change and uncertainty, spreading beyond the early years, through to older adulthood (Fragosa et al, 2013, p. 68). Transitioning to education can be an uneasy time for older learners, and this may be due to the involuntary confrontation of one's older experiences and dispositions with the newly discovered college context, (Ramsay et al, 2006, p. 247). This clash of interests and understandings can bring about significant challenges for the learner in terms of adjustment, experiences and outcomes, and ultimately may be a critical time in terms of retention and participation.

There has been some valuable research carried out on mature learner transitions to college (Briedenhann, 2007; Chapman, 2012/13; Cushman, 2004; Fleming & McKee, 2005; Fragosa, 2013; Harlan, 2015; Klatt & Ray, 2014; O'Boyle, 2014; Ramsay et al, 2006; Reay et al, 2002; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Townsend, 2010; Walters, 2000; Willans & Seary, 2011), however all of these are situated within a HE context. These studies provide important insights into the challenges mature learners face during their first year in college, such as fears about academic ability, difficulties in managing college life with other demands such as family, children and or work, as well as the

financial restraints involved in returning to formal education. There are currently no studies that specifically target mature learner transitions to FE colleges in Ireland, and to a certain degree, this study hopes to bridge the gap somewhat.

### 2.7 Mature students

According to Hardiman (2012), mature learners occupy over half of our FE courses in Ireland and so are far from underrepresented in this sector. There have been multiple attempts to define the term mature student within formal education, and it is evident from the literature that this varies from context to context. In the Irish FET sector, a mature student is anyone aged 21 years or older (Hardiman, 2012, p. 1), whereas in HE, one must be 23 years or older to be classified as a mature student (Carroll & Patterson, 2011, p. 4.). The characteristics of mature learners are often over simplified and subsequently do not offer a true understanding of this cohort (James, 1995, p. 453). There have been attempts to identify the traits or features of mature students from both a sociological and psychological perspective, however this does not allow one to truly capture the mature learner experience in a "meaningful way" (James, 1995, p. 453). Waller (2006) states that previous efforts to characterise mature learners as a "discrete and homogenous group" are now out-dated and only serve benefit in " counting numbers of people studying" (p. 126). We must now move beyond the interests of educational bodies and policy makers to the interests of older learners and efforts should be made to identify individual learning journeys as well as intended learning destinations (Waller, 2006, p. 127). Placing more emphasis on the individual learner should help to eradicate the discriminatory classification of mature students as "though stuffed, labelled and on display in a museum" (Waller, 2006, p. 126). It is also

important to point out that, although those aged 21 years are considered to be mature, these students tend to relate more to their younger peers in terms of closeness in age, dispositions, experiences and interests, Hardiman (2012, p. 16). It is important to be aware of the diversities in age and experience amongst "mature" learners themselves in order to effectively capture and understand the complexities of this cohort.

There is limited amount of research and literature available on mature students in FE, in comparison with the research available on the more "traditional" or younger members of the learning community. With more adults participating and staying in formal learning, there is a growing need to increase our emphasis on the "non-traditional" or older student in this contemporary era. Hardiman (2012) challenges the terms "traditional" and "non-traditional" stating that they lack in meaning nowadays, and do not capture the complexities of the individual student (p. 18).

There have been some valuable studies in recent years that examine the mature learner experience in Ireland, however all of these are situated within a HE context (Fleming & McKee, 2005; Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Inglis and Murphy 1999; O'Boyle, 2014.) There is an obvious absence of literature and studies available on mature learners in Irish FET settings, which is worrying considering the increasing participation rates in recent years. Whilst the literature stemming from HE does offer a valuable insight into the mature learner experience, the application of this research to an FET context may be questioned. That is due to the variances between HE and FET in terms of their learners, access, opportunities, and expectations and both should really be considered in their own right. One important piece of research carried out by Hardiman (2012)

deals specifically with the mature learner experience in a further education (FE) setting in Ireland. The study involved two stages: a preliminary phase to gather initial ideas and demographics about mature learners, and a main research phase to further explore the experiences of mature learners in FE. The data collection methods employed during the preliminary stage included: a quantitative questionnaire involving one hundred participants and a focus group with a further three participants. Qualitative interviews were used as the main data collection method for the study. The sample size for the interviews included nine mature students who were selected using purposive sampling. Initial interviews were held with each participant and a second interview was held at a later stage. Hardiman notes that "most" participants were interviewed a second time making the exact number of re-interviewees unclear (p. 71). There were three areas of inquiry in Hardiman's study. Firstly, it explored the reasons why mature learners returned to education, secondly it investigated the experiences of mature learners while in FE and lastly it explored the benefits to mature learners of participating in FE. The findings offer a valuable insight into the various elements constituting the mature learner experience in terms of readiness to learn, motivations for returning to learning and transformational experiences that occur as a result of engaging in formal learning. The findings suggest that mature students had positive experiences in FE despite the institutional, personal and external challenges they faced. Such institutional issues centred on a lack of confidence in academic performance while the personal and external challenges related to family commitments, tensions in managing social relationships as well as financial and work demands (p. 167). While all of the mature students in the study reported positive experiences in FE, there is no doubt that the adjustments and negotiations involved in becoming a mature student can be incredibly

difficult. Hardiman (2012) conceptualised and labelled the term "finding a voice" (p. 167) to describe the "greatly enhanced confidence and agency" (p. 2) that emerged from findings. The study captured data directly from participants, making it a rich and capturing study. A limitation of the study, as outlined by the researcher, was the inability to capture those who may not have had positive experiences in FE. It is important to consider those who may have had negative experiences and who perhaps dropped out as a result. Further research into students who have dropped out "could enable better preparation and provision to be put in place" (Hardiman, 2012, p. 171).

It is important from the beginning that FE colleges adopt an inclusive and supportive ethos that considers the complexities of the mature students, and one that effectively addresses any conflicting tensions that may emerge. Such tensions may include a feeling of inadequacy in relation to academic skills, a lack of institutional awareness about the needs of its learners, an increased focus on outcomes of learning and decreased attention towards the personal, social and emotional learning aspects involved. According to Hardiman (2012) this ethos is not guaranteed in our FE colleges throughout Ireland, with notable "inconsistencies" highlighted in terms of inclusion and access for mature students across the sector (p. 168).

### 2.8 Challenges faced

An important study carried out by Murphy & Flemming (2000) examines the mature learner experiences in HE and uncovers a "conflict" between the subjective knowledge of mature learners with the superior "college knowledge" that has taken precedence over the last number of decades (p. 82). This study highlights barriers to success in

education, such as relationships, finances and external commitments, however it is the "learning process" itself that may pose the biggest challenge for mature learners who are striving to succeed (Murphy & Flemming, 2000, p. 82). The issues raised with the "learning process" include a failure to recognise the prior knowledge of mature students in a mostly theoretical and abstract setting. This can lead to a superiority of knowledge amongst institutions and may ultimately ignore the subjective knowledge of the learner (Murphy & Flemming, 2000, p. 86). This may lead to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority amongst the mature learner population. There is a growing need to collaborate the theoretical, abstract knowledge of educational institutions with the prior knowledge of adults, in order to succeed in the delivery of equal and democratic education (Murphy & Flemming, 2000, p. 86). Students should be encouraged and facilitated to question, explore and rationalise their prior experiences, in order to make true meanings and comparisons out of their new ones (Murphy & Flemming, 2000, p. 89).

### 2.9 Supporting transitions

Despite the increasing number of mature learners who are engaging in FET, there appears to be an absence of supports/models/frameworks in place that assist this particular cohort with their initial learning experiences. Many educators do extend their support to mature learners in many ways, for example, by offering extra technological assistance or more flexibility with academic work, however this varies amongst colleges as well as teachers and subsequently does not guarantee consistency across the entire sector.

There have been a number of important studies that focus on supporting the transition to HE for mature learners (Briedenhann, 2007; Cushman, 2004; Christenson & Evamy, 2011; Fleming & McKee, 2005; Harlan, 2015; Klatt & Ray, 2014; O'Boyle, 2014; Walters, 2000; Willans & Seary, 2011). Nonetheless, such studies still offer important insights into the various ways that mature learners can be best supported during their transition to a variety of educational settings, including the FET sector. Existing frameworks/models of practice include: first term seminars (Klatt & Ray, 2014), a mature student welcome program (Fleming & Mckee, 2005), as well as a pre-university preparation program where learners are taught the skills necessary for college (Willans & Seary, 2011). Other studies have recommended ways in which educators can better support mature students during the transition phase, for example Briedenhann (2007) recommends that educators need to become more empathetic towards the vulnerabilities of mature learners and should make efforts to understand the individual motivations for learning as best they can. In addition, educators should be more flexible with assessment and understand that low self-confidence and self-esteem may be barriers to success for many. Another study by Cushman (2004) examined the first semester in college for mature learners and found that whilst the students dedicated more of their time and commitment to study and assessments than their younger peers, it did not necessarily prove useful to them in terms of results. There is a need therefore to re-consider college policies around the ways and means of delivering assessments in order to avoid disadvantaging the mature student population.

O'Boyle's (2014) study focused on the transitional experiences of fifteen mature learners in a HE University in Ireland. The findings of this qualitative study indicated

that mature learners experience a number of tensions during their transition to college life. Such tensions related to feeling part and not part of college life, where students reported deliberately separating themselves from their peers somewhat in order to preserve their self-identity. Another tension between "parent and peer" emerged in the study. Mature students reported that they felt pressurised into assuming a manager like role within the classroom and found they almost represented a parent like role in relation to their younger cohort. The last tension that emerged related to a conflict of interests amongst mature students themselves, who found that the need to get in and get a job done clashed with their desire to form meaningful connections with fellow peers. The recommendations from this study suggest that, by creating more inclusive based exercises as well as deliberately assigning leadership roles to younger students in class, the feelings of segregation and "parent" versus "peer" will decrease and subsequently improve the learning experiences for mature learners engaging in formal education.

**2.10 Motivation**

Broadly speaking, the term "motive" stems from the Latin word "to move" (Cheng & Yeh, 2009, p. 597). Within education, motivation alludes to students' subjective encounters, particularly their eagerness to partake in class exercises and their explanations for doing so (Brophy, 1998 as cited in Cheng & Yeh, 2009, p. 597). For decades, psychological theorists (Thorndike, 1898, Pavlov, 1927, Skinner, 1938) observed and measured stimulus-response behaviours as a means of understanding motivation. These methods claimed to be more scientific than humanistic theories of motivation, which were concerned about the workings of the human mind (Cheng & Yeh, 2009, p. 599). Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1962) is a popular example of

a humanistic motivational theory. It identifies five human needs to be satisfied in hierarchical order, ranging from lower to higher including: physiological needs; safety needs; love and belongingness needs; esteem needs and self-actualisation needs. Maslow's theory serves as a reminder to educators to address students' lower needs in order to inspire them to satisfy the higher needs that are associated with education (Brophy, 1998, as cited in Cheng & Yeh, 2009, p. 598).

In the context of human development, Ryan and Deci (2002) state that people have an "innate striving to exercise and elaborate their interests" to "naturally seek challenges, to discover new perspectives, and to actively internalize and transform cultural practices" (p. 3). This in turn, allows individuals to "actualize their human potentials" (p. 3).

Academic motivation has been researched extensively due to its strong association with educational success and outcomes (Fortier, Vallerand, & Guay, 1995; Green et al.,2006; Vallerand et al., 1992; Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci, 2006 as cited in Bedel, 2016, p. 142). Ryan and Deci's (1985, 1991) Self-determination Theory (SDT) is an effective means of understanding academic motivation and the behaviours of students in education (Bedel, 2016, p. 142). SDT in education is concerned principally with advancing students' enthusiasm for education as well as promoting self-trust of own limits and characteristics. If achieved, these outcomes can lead to optimal learning and understanding as well as improved self-awareness and change (Deci et al., 1991, p. 325). In education "conceptual understanding and the flexible use of knowledge" are ideal features of learning. In addition, efforts to fulfill one's psychological needs whilst

remaining socially aware are described as optimal aspects of adjustment (Deci et al., 1991, p. 326). There are three types of motivation within SDT including: Autonomous motivation, Controlled motivation and Amotivation. The first type, Autonomous motivation reflects motivational action that an individual takes "with a sense of volition and self-endorsement" and includes both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Controlled motivation is driven by "external regulation such as reward and punishment" and "introjected regulation" which occurs as a result of ones "desire for approval, avoidance of shame and self-esteem". Amotivation reflects the "absence of intention and motivation" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, 2010 as cited in Bedel, 2016, p. 142). Other motivational theories tend to focus primarily on the direction of behaviour and outcomes whereas SDT seeks to uncover the innate desires that have led to such behaviours in the first place. As a result, SDT describes motivation and behaviour in relation to three innate needs that humans have: the need to be autonomous, the need to be competent and the need to form relatedness with others (Deci et al., 1991, p. 327).

SDT acknowledges various types of motivation, and takes into account the reasons behind action. The fundamental distinction with SDT is "between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55).

O'Reilly's (2014) study of adult learners highlights the importance for educators to identify and understand the "affective variables" associated with motivation in order to enhance "curriculum design and teaching methodology" (p. 1317). Furthermore, the

findings indicate a link between "perceived autonomy support, intrinsic motivation, and learner outcomes" thus reinforcing the need for educators to promote autonomy in the classroom (O'Reilly, 2014, p. 1317).

### 2.11 Conclusion

I feel that the works of Mezirow, Hardiman and O'Boyle should be strongly considered when looking to increase our understanding and awareness about the changes that occur in mature adults who engage in formal learning. Whilst Mezirow's theory of transformation considers the overall experiences of learning, it still provides a useful insight into the negotiations and internal questioning that may occur during the initial transition to education and can provide educators and researchers with a real base for understanding this experience. Hardiman's study provides a detailed insight into the changes that occur to mature learners during their time in FE, and offers an impressive illustration of the complex and diverse mature learner profile in our Irish FET sector. O'Boyle's study is exceptional in its ability to capture the "tensions" that mature learners experience during their time in HE. Again, whilst this study has not limited itself to the initial transition phase, it has enriched our understanding about the internal working systems of mature students who are engaged in a HE setting in Ireland. Further research is needed to examine the first term transitions for mature students in FET, to uncover any challenges or barriers that this cohort of student's face in the beginning of their course. It is felt that such research may prove to be of significant benefit to educators, colleges and governing bodies, all of who have the power to create a more supportive and more inclusive learning environment for all students.

# Chapter 3- Research question

## 3.1 Research title

Laying the Foundations: Transitional Experiences of Mature Students in an Irish Further Education Setting.

## 3.2 Research aim

The aim of this study is to explore the transitional experiences of mature students in FE and to uncover any challenges in the first-term relating to confidence, assessments, digital competence and learning with younger peers. Furthermore, I aim to uncover learner experiences and dispositions in an effort to situate the findings within a context that is relevant and informative. I hope that this insight into the mature learner experience will inform my teaching practice and contribute to the continual development of the FE sector in Ireland.

## 3.3 Research objectives

The objective of this dissertation is to address the research question, its objectives and associated sub-objectives. This includes carrying out research with mature students and completing a comprehensive literature view of the areas relevant to the question, in order to situate the findings within a wider theoretical context. I have constructed two research questions that will assist me in fulfilling the objectives of this study. These include the following:

**1. How motivated are mature learners in coming to FE for the first time?**

I set out to uncover the motivating factors that led participants to FE with the aim of situating their individual experiences into a wider learning context. I have outlined three sub-objectives below to facilitate my investigation of this question.

**Sub-objectives:**

a. To reveal what prompted the participants to re-connect with education.
b. To get an understanding about participant backgrounds in order to situate the data in a wider context.
c. To uncover participant prior and existing attitudes and dispositions about education.

**2. Do mature learners experience any significant challenges during the first term in relation to the following areas: confidence, assessments, digital competence, learning with younger peers?**

The second research question seeks to uncover any first-term challenges experienced in relation to the following areas: confidence, assessments, digital competence and learning with younger peers. As in my first research question, I endeavour to explore a number of sub-objectives that have surfaced from both existing literature and my own teaching practice.

**Sub-objectives:**

a. To explore participants overall academic confidence in FE.

b. To uncover how mature learners felt about academic assessments, particularly written assignments/essays.
c. To determine if mature learners were digitally competent prior to coming to FE and whether or not they felt supported by teaching staff in this area.
d. To gather thoughts about the college induction for mature learners.
e. To understand how mature learners felt about learning with younger peers.
f. To explore the notion of a support group with mature learners.
g. To develop clear teaching and learning recommendations in relation to supporting the mature learner transition to FE.
h. To identify any influential teaching strategies/methods that assist mature learners with their transition to college.

# Chapter 4- Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

This study sought to explore two research questions. Firstly, I set out to explore the motivation of mature students coming to FE and secondly I sought to uncover any first-term challenges in relation to the following areas: academic confidence, completing assessments, digital competence and studying with younger peers. The study was carried out in two stages. The pilot phase was carried out over a period of eight weeks, during the months November and December 2015, whilst the second, the data collection phase, was carried out over a period of twelve weeks, during the months February, March and April, 2016. The present chapter will outline the research objectives as well as the methods and procedures used when collecting data during the pilot and data collection phases of the study. I will explain my decision to adopt a constructivist interpretative approach as well as an interview method to collect and interpret data.

## 4.2 Epistemology

In pursuing this research, I felt it necessary to examine my own epistemological stance. Epistemology can be seen as "a subfield of philosophy" that is "concerned with knowledge, specifically what we know and how we know it" (Sin, 2014, p. 347)

Our personal constructs of being either "passive receptors" or "constructors of knowledge" are important factors in deciding how we interpret and make meaning from future information (Hofter & Pintrich, 2009, p. 3). Prior to initiating action in

research, it is important that the researcher first identifies his/her own epistemological stance in order to support and validate their chosen research methods (Edwards, 2012, p. 382).

In the social sciences, there is a divide between the ways in which knowledge should be uncovered and thought about. The positivist view of knowledge is based upon the idea that knowledge is factual, objective and a separate entity to the individual (Cohen et al 2007, p. 7). In contrast, post-positivist's view knowledge subjectively, maintaining that individuals are active participants in their social world and are responsible for constructing changeable and complex social realities (Cohen et al 2007, p. 20). The post-positivist view rejects the manipulation of its subjects and maintains that research should explore subjects in their most natural form (Cohen et 2007, p. 20). It is the researchers position in this debate that determines future actions and subsequent interpretations of the world.

**4.3 Constructivist interpretive research**

In seeking to explore participant experiences, I adopted a constructivist interpretive approach, a research paradigm that aims to "understand the subjective world of the human experience" (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 21). Such methods emerged in the 1970's and 1980's (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 8) and are not unlike post-positivist approaches to research (Henderson, 2011, p. 342). Most post-positivists believe that social constructs, values and beliefs are what form our perceptions of the world and are subsequently what influence our behaviour (Parsons, 2010, p. 80). In comparison with phenomenology, which assumes that researchers have left their beliefs to one side,

interpretive methods require the knowledge of the researcher in order to compare them with the different concepts, theories, experiences of those being studied (Jackson, 2011, p. 191). According to Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), there is no "universal first step" in interpretive research, rather there are a number of "puzzling" steps that generally originate out of the researchers lived experiences and theoretical understandings (p. 39). Unlike positivists who are testing a hypothesis, constructivists acknowledge that interpretation and theory emerge from the research rather than precede it (Cohen et al, 2012, p. 22). A constructivist approach aligns with the objectives of this study, which is to uncover participant experiences and beliefs rather than assuming them in advance. The interpretative design of the study will assist the researcher to make meaning of the data and subsequently situate the findings within a wider theoretical context.

### 4.4 Qualitative research

Qualitative research plays a significant role in advancing our understanding of various social phenomena, converting knowledge into meaning and assisting individuals to develop new ideas or ways of improving circumstances in the future (Cooley, 2013, p. 257). It is evolutionary by nature and seeks to find similarities and connections that can be explored further (Cooley, 2013, p. 258). Due to individual and group diversity, qualitative researchers cannot generalise and duplicate findings across multiple situations, as they are likely to be very different in terms of "experiences, beliefs and interactions" (Cooley, 2013, p. 258). According to Richards (2015), qualitative researchers should try not to misrepresent the context and complexity of the data, by numerical expressions or quantification (p. 35).

To fully explore the students' own perceptions, experiences and beliefs, I adopted what Kirk and Miller (1986) call a "working definition" of qualitative research. This definition refers to qualitative research as a distinct practice in social science that "fundamentally depends on watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms" (p. 9). I felt that qualitative research would not only enable me to gather rich accounts from participants, but would also facilitate further exploration and interpretation of the data collected.

### 4.5 Pilot study

Prior to undertaking the research, I carried out a pilot study to test different methods of data collection, to provide direction to the researcher and to assist in refining interview questions. During the pilot phase, I distributed questionnaires to twenty-five participants and held a focus group with a further three. I adopted a semi-structured approach when designing the questionnaire, using a mixture of both open and closed questions. The mixture of questions facilitated the collection of basic demographics such as age, gender, employment status, as well as more complex data (including: first term challenges, least and best memories and digital competence). This proved useful in identifying initial issues that warranted further investigation, for example, academic confidence and issues around learning with younger peers. The questionnaire itself was an amended version of one that was used by Hardiman (2012) in his study of mature student's experiences in Further Education, (see appendix 1).

Similar to the questionnaire, the aim of the focus group was to explore queries relevant to the research question and to assist with the creation of interview questions. I sought to investigate some themes and concepts that had previously emerged through readings and informal conversations with both mature students and colleagues. The focus group generated a significant amount of relevant data that was beneficial to me at a later stage. I gained a deeper insight into the mature learner experience as well as uncovering some ideas/concepts for exploration in my interviews. The insights that emerged from the focus group included:

- Expressions of a fear of failure
- Challenges experienced when trying to balance college-family life,
- Difficulties studying with younger peers
- Difficulties with assignments and digital literacy.

I used convenience sampling for the pilot, a method that affords teachers and others the opportunity to select respondents such as students who are accessible at the time of carrying out the research (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 113). To save time and ensure that I adhered to my timescale, I recruited students who I was teaching on a day-to-day basis. I arranged to distribute the questionnaires during class time, which meant I was able to answer any queries participants had. This in turn reduced the number of non-responses or incomplete questionnaires. At a preliminary level, the pilot study was a useful means of exploring initial ideas for further exploration. It helped to identify and test different methods of data collection, which subsequently influenced the direction of the research.

### 4.6 Interviews

Emerging from the social sciences in the 1980's, interviews were considered by many as "a progressive dialogical form of research" (Kvale 2006, p. 481). From a wider perspective, Kvale (2006) states that the qualitative research interview has "become a sensitive and powerful method for investigating subjects' private and public lives", often referred to as "a democratic emancipating form of social research" (p. 481). In research, interviews signify a shift away from viewing subjects as external, quantifiable and manipulable data, toward a participative notion of knowledge as a shared construction between individuals (Cohen et al 2007, p. 349).

Before selecting my research method, I first had to revisit the aim and purpose of this study; that is to explore in depth the experiences of mature students and reveal participant beliefs and assumptions about particular phenomena. I chose interviews as the preferred data collection method for a number of reasons. Firstly, interviews are unique in that they enable participants to discuss with the interviewer their assumptions about the world in which they live, through verbal and or non-verbal means (Cohen et al 2007, p. 349). This is important when seeking to achieve the objectives of the study such as gathering personal accounts as well as exploring various ideas/concepts in detail. Secondly, in comparison with quantitative methods that "alienate" the researcher from its subjects, interviews allow the researcher to enter "into authentic personal relationships with their subjects" (Kvale, 2006, p. 481). There is also an assumption that the dialogue from interviews is more likely to provide new information that has not been presented in other texts, due to perhaps the ability for participants to articulate experiences and beliefs that couldn't be otherwise translated (Fadyl, 2013, p.

27). In addition, interviews are both an effective and flexible means of gathering various types of data, from the very basic (for example demographics), to the more complex (for example personal constructions of experiences and beliefs) (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 349).

It was important that I explored the interview method in depth and identified different perceptions about their use in research. Kvale (2006) identifies a contrast in perceptions about interviews, from that of a "warm and caring dialogical conception" to an "agonistic" means where one can "play on power differences and contradictions" (p. 481). Kvale (2006) challenges the common view of interviews as dialogues, outlining that an interview is not a "joint endeavour" but a "conversation with a purpose" (p. 483). I have considered at length the various factors that constitute power differentials in an interview and have maintained an active awareness of these throughout the collection phase of the study. Such imbalances in power may be due to a number of factors including the following (Kvale, 2006, p. 484):

- Interviews are organised by research interviewer. They control all aspects of the where, when, how and time as well as deciding upon the purpose of conversation.
- The interviewer controls the direction of dialogue, in other words, asks the questions and the interviewee responds. The interview is a one-way dialogue. It would be unusual for the interviewee to automatically initiate conversation.
- The interview is an instrumental method and serves as a means to achieving set goals for the researcher.
- The interviewer may have a hidden agenda that the interviewee is unaware of.

This may be to extract more information about a particular area that ordinarily would be guarded.

- The interviewer is the interpreter. Unlike day-to-day dialogue where there is a joint interpretation of statements, the interviewer has the overall power to interpret what the interviewee said according to his/her own theoretical framework.

Furthermore, Kvale (2006, p. 485) identifies "countermeasures" that the interviewee or interviewer may have in order to try and negotiate the power such as:

- Interviewee may choose not to answer or deflect a question that they do not wish to respond to. Occasionally the interviewee can try to question the interviewer or even withdraw from the process. The latter depends on the situation at hand with "child interviews and elite interviews as two extremes" (p.485).
- In an attempt to minimize the power differentials, interviewees may be asked to confirm the researcher's interpretations of what he/she has said. It must be acknowledged that whilst this is an attempt to seek confirmation, not all interviewees are emotionally prepared to accept "critical interpretations of what they have told the interviewer" (p. 485). Ultimately, it is the interviewer who decides on what interpretations are included in the research findings.

Failing to acknowledge the existing power structures in interviews can "seriously impair the validity of the knowledge constructed" (Kvale, 2006, p. 486). This is due to a lack of regard for how or why interviewees are responding to certain questions, which ultimately weakens the research argument. Although interviewer power may

compromise validity, Kvale (2006) suggests that a certain level should still exist in order to achieve set goals and yield valuable information for the interviewer (p. 486). I found Kvale's interpretation of interviews to be particularly beneficial during the data collection and analysis stage. It provided me with the necessary knowledge and skills to develop trusting interview relationships and to create a safe setting for exploration. I maintained the awareness that ultimately, the quality and direction of an interview depends upon the extent to which participants trust and know their interviewer (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 350).

Whilst the participants were explicitly informed of the intentions of the interview, that was to seek truthful accounts of their experiences, the question remained as to whether they still may have orchestrated particular responses according to what they thought the interviewer was seeking. Whilst interpretations are ultimately dependent on a person's own interpretative framework, efforts can be made to verify perceptions of data with participants. This includes presenting interpretations back to the interviewee who may or may not hold the same or similar assumptions about the data. This method of verifying interpretations can also present a misleading assumption to the reader. That is, that the interviewee's own interpretive competence is at the same or a similar level to that of the researcher, comprehending what is being suggested to them. In the interviews, I made a conscious effort to translate my interpretations in what I perceived to be a clear and relatable manner. In addition, I was aware of the need to move beyond the confines of constructed sentences and listen to the more elegant details. These included, slips of the tongue, changes to tone of voice, prolonged silences, changes to body language as well as the overall demeanor of the participant.

In deciding what type of interview I would carry out, I drew upon Patton's (1980) four types of interview including: informal conversation interview, interview guide approach, standardized open-ended and closed quantitative interviews. The selection of an interview method depends upon the nature of inquiry and whether it seeks to explore test against a hypothesis (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 354). I decided to use the standardized open-end approach, as this best facilitated my objectives of gathering comprehensive data for my research. The questions were outlined beforehand (see appendix 2) and all interviewees were asked the "same basic questions in the same order" (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 353). This facilitated comparability amongst answers and made sure that all of the relevant topics were covered. In addition, this method was organized and systematic which subsequently proved useful when analysing the data.

**4.7 Sample selection**

Non-probable purposive sampling was used to select participants, a means which affords the researcher the ability to target specific groups relevant to the research question. It is important to note that non-probability samples do not attempt to generalise findings beyond the sample in question (Cohen, 2007, p. 113). Instead I sought to examine in depth the experiences of participants with the goal of broadening my understanding about their learning experiences.

I carried out the research in my work setting, an FE college that is host to approximately nine hundred students each year. The college provides approximately forty QQI level 5 and level 6 full-time courses, spanning across five departments including: Art, Design and Technology; Business, Humanities and IT; Sports, Leisure

and Tourism; Community and Healthcare and Applied Science. Whilst the majority of students are in their late teens or early twenties, there are increasing numbers of mature learners coming to the college each year. In terms of progression, most school leavers view FE as a stepping-stone into HE, with minimal numbers going into the workforce straight away. On the contrary, only a small amount of mature learners look to move into HE, with the majority seeking employment post completion of their level 5 or level 6 courses. This is not true for all mature students, with some also wishing to progress into HE, for example, some pre-nursing and art and design students who may wish to complete their degree in this area.

The inclusion criteria for the study included students aged 28 years or older who had come to the college to study on a QQI level 5 course for the first time. In seeking participants, I distributed an information leaflet to colleagues (see appendix 3) to give to their students in class. From this, I identified with a possible nine participants, eight of whom matched the criteria and were willing to participate. It is thought that this sample size was appropriate considering the scope and timeframe of the study. There was a mixed gender approach to the study with five female and three males taking part. For a brief participant biography see table 1. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to ensure participant confidentiality at all times.

**Table 1**
*Participant Biography*

| | ***Mary*** | ***Ben*** | ***Paul*** | ***Jason*** | ***Lorraine*** | ***Patricia*** | ***Eileen*** | ***Julie*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Age*** | 36 | 36 | 47 | 29 | 54 | 46 | 46 | 28 |
| ***Course*** | Animal Care | Sport & Fitness | Sport & Fitness | Animal Care | Design | Hairdressing | Creative Design | Animal Care |
| ***Trigger for study*** | Quit job | Lost job | Lost job | Lost job | Daughter now in secondary school | Son less dependant on her at home | Left family business | Lost Job |
| ***Interview time in minutes*** | 36 | 42 | 43 | 28 | 33 | 25 | 37 | 19 |
| ***Interview mode*** | Person | Person | Person | Person | Person | Person | Person | Person |

## 4.8 Data collection

Prior to commencing the research, I met individually with all of the participants to discuss the intentions of the study. Once explained, I distributed a consent form to each participant (see appendix 4) and reminded them of their continued right to withdraw at any stage, before during or after the research process. Once all of the consent forms were signed and collected, I arranged a suitable day and time to interview each participant. The interviews were carried out over twelve weeks, from February to April 2016. The interviews were carried out within the college itself, more specifically, in pre-booked offices or classrooms that would be uninterrupted. The interviews lasted twenty to forty-five minutes. All participants were informed that the interviews would be audio recorded and were happy to proceed. This meant that rather than trying to take notes, I could immerse myself in the situation and prevent interruptions to the flow of conversation. Immediately after the interviews, I recorded my initial thoughts as well

as anything else that stood out to me. All of interviews were then transcribed at a later date.

### 4.9 Insider research

An important consideration when carrying out the study was that of "insider" research. Dwyer (2009) highlights that the issue of insider research extends to all qualitative researchers, who play such a "direct and intimate role in both data collection and analysis" (p. 55). In considering my own position, I drew upon three "membership roles" that qualitative researchers assume during any type of observational research, (Adler and Adler, 1987). These include, peripheral, active and complete membership roles. Outside of the research context, peripheral researchers may have marginal contact with participants, on a day-to-day basis. They are not involved in the group activities that directly relate to the research process and so have limited insider contact. An active researcher is directly involved with the activities of participants, assuming both a functional and observational role in the research process. Complete members are deemed as those who are fully immersed with the group's activities, sharing the same goals and beliefs as fellow members (Adler and Adler, 1987).

I consider myself to be a peripheral researcher, with both inside and outside connections. I am employed as a teacher in the same college where I am collecting the data and whilst I do have daily contact with students, I remain separate from the phenomena in question. An insider/outsider position has been described as ideal by (Hellewell, 2006 P.487), in terms of gaining easy access to the participants, as well as a clear insight into the structure and culture of the setting beforehand (Hardiman, 2012, p.

75). Insiders are often deemed to have a different perspective of the research setting and findings than outsiders who have no familiarity with the research (Bartuneck & Louis, p. 1). I do feel that my previous experiences both in and out of the classroom offered me different perspectives of the student experience and influenced my decision to research the area further.

In an effort to minimise over familiarity, I did not interview any students who I had daily contact with as a teacher. I felt that not knowing the participants prior to the interviews would help me maintain my position as a researcher. Before the interviews, I tried to establish a small amount of familiarity with each participant, through everyday discourse. This was done in an effort to relax the participant and develop common ground of some form. Nonetheless, I remained conscious that my position as a researcher needed to remain separate from that of a teacher and that a certain level of "strangeness" was required to achieve this (Hardiman, 2012, p. 76).

**4.10 Validity and reliability**

In recent decades, there has been a shift away from the traditional notion of gathering unbiased data toward a more collaborative collection process where researchers are central to the study. It is now acceptable practice for researchers to contribute towards developing meanings and understandings from their findings (Rooney, 2005, p. 4). As a consequence, the definition of validity has transformed and is no longer just an expression of how effective or weak a tool is in measuring what it proposes to (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 133). It has since become a much more complex process where "depth, richness and scope of data achieved" as well as the " participants approached, the

extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher" are considered (Winters, 2000 as cited in Cohen et al, 2007 p. 133).

Qualitative research is interpretative by nature, meaning that the researcher is "typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants" (Creswell, 2003, p. 237). It is important that the researcher identifies any concerns in relation to their own biases and beliefs, personal background information as well as any ethical concerns that could impact the validity of the research (Creswell, 2003, p. 237). I have been teaching in FE for the past two years and have been naturally attracted to the diversity of its population in terms of age, gender and socio-economic status. In particular, I have felt naturally drawn to the learning experiences of mature students in the college. This may well be due to the fact that I myself went back to college as a mature learner and had a somewhat transformational experience. I have developed a passion for lifelong learning and see its value in empowering people. My personal experiences of being a mature student and teaching mature students has undoubtedly inspired me to carry out this research.

As a researcher, I had to acknowledge that my personal and professional experiences might potentially influence interpretations made in the study. Creswell (2003) suggests that in order to combat this, the researcher needs to "actively look for evidence to support their positions and to create favorable or unfavorable conclusions about the sites or participants" (p. 237). In addition, Cohen (2007) suggests that interviewers should aim to "minimize the amount of bias as much as possible" (p.150). As a qualitative researcher, this is something I strived for during the course of the study.

Cohen's (2007) identification of potential biases was useful when trying to consider all elements of my own practice. The sources of bias include:

- Interviewers own attitude and expectations.
- Interviewers seeing themselves in participants.
- Interviewers seeking pre-conceived answers and misrepresenting what the participant means.
- Interviewee not understanding the question being asked (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 150).

I considered each of these biases when carrying out the research and believe it prevented me from exerting my own assumptions and expectations on participants. I was careful not to phrase questions in a way that would determine the answer, for example, I asked participants "how they found their first assignment" rather than whether "they found it challenging or not". I used clear everyday language during the interviews to ensure that participants were not misled and understood the questions being asked.

### 4.11 Ethical considerations

Ethics in research refers to the protection of human participants in a study. The major ethical difficulty for researchers relates to a tension in balancing demands. These demands include a need to pursue the truth as scientists, and a need to protect subjects' from any potential harm that the study may present (Cohen et al 2007, p. 51). More specifically, the use of interviews in research present their own ethical dimensions. Cohen (2007) identifies three ethical issues surrounding interviewing including,

"informed consent, confidentiality, and the consequences of the interviews" (p.382). I will explain how I dealt with each of these issues before proceeding to carry out the research.

Firstly, as I was planning on using human participants in my research, I had to seek ethical approval from the ethics committee in the National College of Ireland (NCI). Once this was approved in January 2016, I gained verbal and written permission from the gatekeeper to the research. In my case, this was the principal in my work setting. Once I had permission to proceed, I then gave some information leaflets to my colleagues for distribution (see Appendix 3). I put my name and contact details on the leaflets for students to get in touch. My colleagues recommended twelve potential participants for the study. I asked my colleagues to inform the students to contact me if they wished to take part. Of the nine students who initiated contact, eight suited the inclusion criteria while one did not meet the age requirement. I met individually the eight potential participants and explained to them the full nature and intention of my research. I guaranteed their anonymity at all times before, during and after the study and informed them that participation was completely voluntary. All eight participants agreed to take part in the study. Before commencing the data collection phase, I met with each participant again to provide more in depth information about the study. I explained my intention to carry out one-to-one interviews lasting anywhere from twenty to forty-five minutes. I outlined the nature of the questions being asked and again reminded participants it was completely up to them whether they chose to take part. I answered all questions posed by participants and ensured that they were aware of the processes involved in the study. Prior to interviewing, I obtained written consent

from the participants and further reminded them that there was no obligation to participate if they did not wish to do so. A sample of the written consent form can be seen in appendix 4. All of the participants reported feeling satisfied with the information they received and were quite willing to take part.

In order to protect participant anonymity, I ensured that any soft copies of data were kept in a locked cabinet that only I had access to. I kept hard copies of interviews and data in a password initiated folder on my personal laptop. In addition, I removed any identifiers from the data to further protect participant anonymity. I will properly dispose of and delete study data/documents after the study has been completed.

It was my duty as a researcher to protect the welfare and safety of participants during the course of the study. Whilst I did not anticipate that any ethical issues would arise, I had to prepare nonetheless. I planned all interview questions carefully so as to minimise the risk of causing any upset or trauma to participants. Unpredictability of semi-structured interviews meant there was a possibility that participants may have ended up somewhere they had not previously intended and so it was important to prepare for this in advance. All participants were informed that should they need it, the guidance counsellor was available to answer or advise on any issues/concerns before, during or after the interviews. All of the participants reported feeling happy with the direction of interviews and did not see it necessary to seek assistance afterwards. As both the researcher and interviewer, I remained satisfied that the participant's best interests and safety took precedence throughout the entire research process.

### 4.12 Analysis

Thematic analysis was the preferred tool for the analysis of data. I transcribed the audio recordings verbatim (see appendix 5 for sample transcript) and read over the field notes and transcripts several times before formally coding and extracting themes from the data. I then followed the systematic guidelines set out by Braun & Clarke (2006) in relation to undergoing thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is described as a "flexible" and effective research tool, which "can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5). It affords the researcher the ability to identify patterns or themes from the data and then analyse these in much more detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). It fits into a constructivist paradigm and enables the researcher to make meanings from socially constructed situations. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phases of thematic analysis are outlined below:

**Phase One:** This phase involved getting to know the data in detail and becoming familiar with the "depth and breadth of the content" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 17). I collected and transcribed all of the data myself and as a result, I found that the familiarisation process occurred in a natural and progressive way. I listened to each interview before transcribing and found this to be an effective way of connecting with and extracting some initial ideas from the data. I took my time with this phase as I did not want to become prematurely selective about initial themes or notions, thus risking the quality of analysis in the succeeding stages. This phase is described as "a key phase

of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology" (Bird, 2005: 227 as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 17).

**Phase Two:** Once I became familiar with the data and had developed some initial ideas and thoughts, I then began to manually generate "initial codes" (p. 17). This involved systematically working through each data set to "identify interesting aspects" as well as "repeated patterns" that may contribute to the development of themes at a later stage. Rather than allowing the data to completely determine coding, I approached the coding process with "specific questions in mind" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18). This ensured that the research questions remained central to the study.

Firstly, I thoroughly examined each transcript and separated data extracts into identifiable codes. I then merged all of the codes into one table, and proceeded to "match them up with the data extracts that demonstrate that code" (p. 19). Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that there is no "data set without contradiction" and individual extracts can be placed into "as many different themes" as needed. Although these apparent themes may not seem useful at this point, they may prove otherwise at a later stage (p. 19). It was also important to pay attention to the "tensions and inconsistencies" in the data, all of which contribute to the development of themes and the "relationships between them" (p. 19). These tensions and contradictions play an important role in shaping the overall conceptual picture and therefore should not be ignored (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19). For an example of the initial coding process in this study, see table 2 below.

**Table 2**
*Example of initial coding table*

| Initial Codes | Interview Data |
|---|---|
| Stuck in a rut<br>No passion for job | I went from college the first time to working in restaurants and then I ended up in the bank… I just didn't like office work. |
| Passion for course<br>Readiness to learn<br>Loss of control over destiny? | I always loved the animals and I always just loved been around them, so it was sort of, again it was something I always said I, I always wanted to be a vet when I was a kid, |
| Start of them (younger students) versus us (mature students) emerges<br>Feeling isolated | Its hard to know if your gonna sort of fit in with people who are so much younger than you as well you know?<br><br>…was just sort of, you come in and you do your work and you go home. |
| Fear of failure<br>Away so long | …just being out of the environment of learning so long, em you've all these sort of doubts in your head like, will I be able to do it, will I be able to do the work? |
| Fear of technology/computers.<br>Emphasising the gap between her IT knowledge and that of her younger peers. | …when I was in school we I really have computers do you know what I mean?<br>… god will I be able to keep up with all the these whizz kids?<br>…I didn't know what moodle was, I'd never heard of it before, but em, everybody else seemed to know what it was. |

**Phase Three:** Once phase two was complete, I began to sort the codes into potential themes. Some of the codes were placed into "main themes", some formed "sub-themes", and others were "discarded" due to a lack of evidence from extracts. At this point, a "thematic map" began to form and I started to deeply consider the relationships between different themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20). I created a new table to format this stage of the coding, see below.

**Table 3.**
*Sample thematic coding table*

| Theme | Sub-theme | Code | Data extract |
|---|---|---|---|
| Passion and readiness to learn | Trigger point<br><br>Motivation to learn<br><br>Ready to learn | Passion for course<br><br>Readiness to learn<br><br>Has time now to study<br><br>Second chance<br><br>Redundancy | What if I had of finished college and what would I really be doing… that's really where my passion was, I hadn't literally drawn a thing in twenty years.<br><br>…she is now in second year in secondary school so I decided it was time to have a bit of time for myself<br><br>After the redundancy, I didn't want to twiddle my thumbs you know so, I was looking at this and it came straight up and I said yeh I'm gonna do this, it's what I'm interested in you know…. keep my mind occupied |
| Prior experiences affecting present one | Prior negative experiences in education<br>Insecurity<br><br>Lack of confidence | Away for so long<br><br>History would repeat itself<br><br>Fear of academic ability | …so I was always sort of worried that maybe I haven't sort of grown up (laughs) as much as I like to think I have… but I always thought that maybe that sort of aspect would sort of sneak back into different things<br><br>…and that's why I'm afraid that I might do the same again, so I have to watch and keep on top of things<br>…like the fear when the exams come up, will we have enough time to study for them, you know, because I feel obviously at my age I need to probably practice on it you know, like memory cells kind of fail a bit. |
| Huge workload | Writing assignments<br><br>Huge workload<br><br>Typing an issue | | It's just colossal the amount of work that we had to go through, and we are still in there in the depths of it<br><br>I goes oh god I have to have that done and all of a sudden I got another one in and I was kind of panicking then<br><br>I really would like if I was able to handwrite it, I, because I have to handwrite it and then I have to type it out it takes up a lot of time and I'm really slow at my typing |

**Phase Four:** During this phase, the existing themes were further refined. At this point, some of the existing themes merged into one overall theme, as seen in table 3 below. This stage involved re-visiting all coded extracts and re-checking that they appeared to "form a coherent pattern" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20). The second part of this phase involved considering the "validity of individual themes in relation to the data set"

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20). This meant, considering whether the selected themes were a fair representation of the data set and to identify any missed data that was not formerly coded. In the present study, there was no un-coded data at this point and the selected themes were considered to be a fair representation of the data. The next step for the researcher involves deciding whether to cease coding or to continue further. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), if the refinements are no longer yielding significant contributions then it is advised to stop the coding process (p. 21). This was the case for the present study and so coding was complete at this point.

**Table 4**
*Example of refinement of themes*

| **Sub-theme/s** | **Theme** | **Revised Theme** |
|---|---|---|
| Trigger point<br>Motivation to learn<br>Ready to learn | Passion and readiness to learn | Motivation to learn and trigger point |
| Prior negative experiences in education<br>Insecurity<br>Lack of confidence | Prior experiences affecting present one | Fear of failure |
| Writing assignments<br>Huge workload<br>Typing an issue | Challenges with work | Assessment overload |

**Phase 5:** This phase involved defining the themes as well as analysing the data within them. All extracts relevant to the themes were identified and their significance to that particular theme was explained. This helped to ensure consistency and integrity among extracts and chosen themes. In the present study, this phase took shape in the form of a detailed written analysis of the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 22).

**Phase 6:** This phase involved carrying out the final write up of findings and analysis. At this point, the researcher should have developed their "complicated story" of the research and make it clear how the chosen analytical method lead to such conclusions (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 23). The reader should find the story capturing and logical, with sufficient evidence of data provided to support chosen themes. In the final write up, it was important to "capture" extracts that reflected "the essence of the point" being demonstrated (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 23). In addition, it was important to place extracts within an "analytic narrative" that illustrated the story being told and its purpose in addressing the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 23).

# Chapter 5- Research findings

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the research findings from the interviews. Keeping in line with a constructivist approach, the findings were directed by the data rather than issues. The results are organised by the research question, keeping the inquiry in mind at all times (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 468). In addition, this method of arrangement facilitates the researcher to collectively present the findings from all data sources rather than adopt a dis-jointed approach. Cohen et al (2007) point out the risk of decontextualizing findings when data is fragmented into distinct groupings (p. 467). I have maintained an awareness of this possibility at all times and have tried to remain as true to the emerging sequence as possible. I have included direct quotes from the interviews in an effort to remain true to participant accounts as well as effectively rationalise my conclusions to the reader.

## 5.2 Motivation

Motivation for learning emerged as a key theme from the data analysis. Motivation is described as the process of acting upon something whereas one who is amotivated is said not to move or act (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 54). In trying to establish why the participants were motivated to come to FE, one must consider the intrinsic and extrinsic forces involved in the motivation process. Vallerand (2001) outlines that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation should be viewed on a "continuum" ranging from a "high to low level of self-determination" rather than in a "dichotomy" (p. 312).

Intrinsic motivation suggests that the individual's interest and desire alone causes them to act, whereas extrinsically motivated individuals are said to act as a result of reasons outside of their internal locus of control, for example, to receive a "tangible reward" or to "avoid punishment" (Deci and Ryan, 2008, p. 15).

On varying levels, all participants revealed intrinsic and extrinsic motivators when discussing what led them to FE. On the one hand, all of the participants expressed their desire to learn their chosen subject and on the other it seems that triggers such as unemployment or changes to the family structure were the drivers in actually moving some of the participants beyond procrastination. Interestingly, whilst all of the participants did express their desire to work in their chosen field afterwards, their interest in their chosen course seemed to take precedence during the interviews. As is clear in the following excerpt, Mary tells of her passion for her chosen area of study.

> *…I wanted something to do, I always loved the animals and I always just loved been around them, so it was sort of, again it was something I always said I, I always wanted to be a vet when I was a kid…*

Intrinsically, Mary seems quite motivated to learn this subject area and relates back to her childhood dream of becoming a vet. What has motivated Mary to act now seems to be her unhappiness with her most recent office job.

> *…I ended up in the bank, so, to try and get a proper job as they say... I took redundancy cos it was taken over by another bank, and I went on then to work in a solicitors for four years and then decided that I just didn't like office work, it wasn't for me. So I had an epiphany, and then I went on to come here, essentially, I left that job and I came here.*

Another participant, Eileen, dropped out after her first year of an Art degree and although it has been over twenty-five years since this decision, her regret remains quite evident.

> *…What if I had of finished college and what would I really be doing… that's really where my passion was… I hadn't literally drawn a thing in twenty years!*

Like Mary, Eileen felt that she had to get a job and ended up working in her families engineering business for 15 years.

> *…I knew my dad really wanted me in the family business as well and art college my god who would be going to art college? So I didn't finish college and I ended up going back and working in the business… and there's the loyalty end of it as well, you know like? Telling my dad that I was leaving, now that was the hardest hardest thing and even still, that's a touchy subject you know? You were nearly betraying the family!*

It is clear that Eileen felt pressurised into working alongside her family at a young age. Despite her recent decision to exit the family business, she still feels guilty for making the decision, describing it as a family betrayal. Nonetheless, Eileen still acted and made the decision to come to FE. In relation to the decision to finally act, Eileen indicates that a change in family structure prompted her to move out of her working role and into college. With reference to her thirteen-year old daughter, Eileen states;

> *…She just didn't need me as much during the day… even though I was working...it kind of had moved into this other place where you, we nearly had three adults in the house almost.*

For Eileen, her passion for art and newfound freedom were the key motivators in her decision to return to learning.

In addition to Mary and Eileen, another two participants (Lorraine and Jason) also used the words "ended up" in relation to where they worked after their school/college days. Lorraine reflects upon completing her science degree and "ending" up in the VEC.

*At the time of the degree course I realised science was not the area I wanted to pursue… Some areas of interest in the course… ended up working with the VEC Cork on youth skills programme.*

For Jason, his lack of passion for his apprenticeship caused him to quit his job and change career:

*...eh I started an apprenticeship with my uncle doing plumbing which was great when I was younger but I decided it wasn't for me so I left that job… I wanted to kind of do something for myself rather than actually work for somebody you know?...So, I ended up opening a cafe... and that was brilliant but it was just so stressful and I wasn't able for it at all to be honest with ya.*

I found it interesting that half of the participants (Mary, Jason, Lorraine, Eileen) all used the words "ended-up" to tell part of their story. These words may represent participant efforts to convey a lack of or absence of personal control over where they "ended-up". It was as if to say that some other force was responsible for leading them there in the first place.

Similar to Eileen, both Lorraine and Patricia also expressed their newfound freedom as a result of their children reaching secondary school. Lorraine makes reference to her teenage daughter.

*...she is now in second year in secondary school so I decided it was time to have a bit of time for myself...*

Patricia was also afforded the opportunity to "go back" and study now that her son is approaching his Leaving Certificate;

*…my son is sixteen at the moment… he's in fifth year at the moment and he'll be doing his Leaving next year…I was unemployed for a good while… so I decided to take that opportunity and go back...*

Again, like the other participants, Patricia states she always "wanted to do" her chosen course since a young age;

> *…I always wanted to do hairdressing and there wasn't availability when I was young and now its now here…*

Like the other participants, it seems that Patricia's underlying passion for hairdressing and recent opportunity to change direction are what prompted her to come to FE.

For the remaining three participants (Ben, Paul, Julie), it seems that unemployment was the key trigger in prompting them to come to FE. Ben talks about his time on the social welfare during the recession.

> *When the Celtic tiger went bust I was on the social welfare for a while, and eh, I was sitting on social welfare for two or three years doing nothing and I says I cant do this anymore, so I went in and asked them, is there anything for me to do?… and that was the start of me reaching out to find ways to get educated.*

Similar to Ben, Paul's redundancy caused him to question his direction and ultimately prompted him to come to FE.

> *…After the redundancy, I didn't want to twiddle my thumbs you know so, I was looking at this and it came straight up and I said yeh I'm gonna do this, it's what I'm interested in you know... keep my mind occupied.*

Similarly, Julie states that she was sick of being in and out of contract work and so decided to change her career path.

> *The sort of the degree I did, its kinda not constant work you get, its contract to contract so I kind of got sick of that and I sort of was like oh I want to follow my other career option and this is sort of like an introductory course to kind of like ya know?*

The findings above support Ryan and Deci's (1985) Self Determination Theory which claims that motivation stems from three physiological and psychological needs including; competence, relatedness and autonomy. All participants expressed on some level their desire to become more self-directed and to pursue their interest or passion that previously was not afforded to them. It seems that participants have turned to the

social context of education as a means of satisfying these physiological and psychological needs and to "yield the most positive psychological, developmental and behavioural outcomes" for themselves (Ryan and Deci, 2008, p. 15).

### 5.3 Fear of failure

The fear of failure was something that emerged amongst all participants either intentionally or unintentionally. Some participants (Mary, Ben, Paul) explicitly stated their concerns whilst the remaining five (Eileen, Patricia, Lorraine, Jason, Julie) all unintentionally revealed their inner worry at failing to succeed. Referring to her "flighty" nature Mary recalls her time in secondary school.

> *...I was a bit sort of flighty I suppose* [laughs], *you know, kind of, I know that about myself so I was always sort of worried that maybe I haven't sort of grown up* [laughs] *as much as I like to think I have… but I always thought that maybe that sort of aspect would sort of sneak back into different things.*

Ben had two previous college dropouts and expresses his concern that history will repeat itself this time around.

> *...And that's why I'm afraid that I might do the same again, so I have to watch and keep on top of things, but the fact like I'm a lot more mature now… a lot more wiser and I manage time better.*

In relation to age, Paul expresses his fear that he can no longer learn at the same pace as younger people.

> *Like the fear when the exams come up, will we have enough time to study for them, you know, because I feel obviously at my age I need to probably practice on it you know, like memory cells kind of fail a bit.*

Indirectly, it became apparent that despite efforts to remain positive towards learning, the remaining five (Eileen, Patricia, Lorraine, Jason, Julie) all unintentionally

transmitted their own fears around succeeding in FE. With reference to her younger peers, Julie illustrates the pressure she felt to succeed in FE.

> *…It's like oh you've done the Leaving Cert last year, you'll remember this but it's like I did my leaving cert ten nearly eleven years ago, like I don't remember any of this... so that's it and it still is a challenge.*

All except one participant (Lorraine) had negative dispositions towards their former time in secondary school or college and it seemed that coming to FE served as a reminder to them of that time. Ben recalls the day he got expelled from secondary school.

> *I was in trouble and I was standing outside the principal's office and everyone was in the same uniform and had the same heads, same faces, everyone just you know, it was like eh robots… I said we're just being taught certain things here…. what were been taught here could be wrong for all we know, you know?*

For Mary, secondary school was not an enjoyable experience and she made reference to her fidgety nature that she feared would continue to inhibit her academically.

> *…I was never sort of great in school, I was a bit sort of flighty I suppose… I was always sort of the one at the back of the class that was moved up to the front of the class to be told to stop messing…It definitely hasn't reverted back to that* [laughs]*, I'm kind of glad of that.*

Despite the sixteen-year gap from education, Mary still feared that she would revisit her old ways and in her eyes, fail to succeed in FE. It is evident that her negative secondary school experiences led to feelings of insecurity around education and in many ways explain why she formerly distanced herself from formal learning for quite some time.

Like Mary, Julie also draws on her prior negative experiences in secondary school and states that her time in FE reminds her of when she used to get into trouble in secondary school.

> *…It's very much so back into you know secondary school… kind of like been scolded by teachers you know?*

With reference to his recent time in unemployment, Jason also indicates his fear of returning back to his old ways.

> *I like being busy because it keeps your, keeps your mind active…. because I could easily fall into that that slump again you know?...*

Lorraine also reflects upon her fear of not being good enough in FE.

> *I remember having this beetroot in front of me and the pen and the paper and I just felt naked because there was young guys across from me and it was just rolling out of them, the art. And so there was the kind of fear, you know, will I be as good or will I be able to be at the same standard?...in hindsight it was fine but at the time it was a case of get me out of here!*

The negativity shown towards school/college seemed to dominate discussion and it appeared that all participants except Lorraine felt an onus to disclose their previous "failed" attempts in education. Once the participants had "disclosed" their prior negative experiences, they were more relaxed in discussing their most recent progress in FE, which in all cases was positive. Despite being older, all of the participants were insecure about their learning capabilities to varying degrees. It was important for the participants to depict their prior negative educational experiences in order to move forward and safely discuss their present one.

### 5.4 Assessment overload?

Three of the participants felt strongly about having too many assessments throughout the year. From my experience as a teacher, many mature students find assignments and other forms of assessment a significant challenge in FE. This may be partly due to their absence from academia and fears surrounding academic ability. In addition, the majority of assessments nowadays are typed rather than written. The FE sector is predominately continuous assessment based and with a short academic year, teachers have little option but to distribute assignment briefs early on in the course. This means that students may have several assignments to submit in or around the same time. Best practice indicates that teachers should set a word count per assignment and stick as close to it as possible. This is not necessarily the reality in FE and can mean that there are inconsistencies in terms of what is expected from teacher to teacher. All of the participants expressed their shock at the high level of work expected from them in FE.

Lorraine uses the word "colossal" to describe her workload.

> *...It's just colossal the amount of work that we had to go through, and we are still in there in the depths of it.*

Similarly, Eileen uses the word "massive" to describe her working day.

> *...My daughter said to me mammy your working more hours now than you were when you were working, it's massive!...*

Patricia recalls the bombardment of work she received.

> *...I goes oh god I have to have that done and all of a sudden I got another one in and I was kind of panicking then…*

It is interesting how both Lorraine and Eileen use two extreme adjectives, "colossal" and "massive" to describe their workload in FE. Similarly, Patricia describes her panic as a result of her continual and "sudden" workload. In one sense, these extracts may initially indicate that there is too much work placed upon them, however none of the three participants indicated at any point that they were falling behind with their work. Despite illustrating a significant workload, it may be fair to suggest that participants still want to be reasonably challenged. Julie supports this notion in the following excerpt.

> *I suppose in terms of appreciating Further Education like I would, I'd have more admiration for it that I don't think it gets, do you know? ... Because like you'd say that you know I'm in a college of Further Education... people do have a bit of an attitude, like scoff at it sometimes... I can see that now from being in it that it's not the case you know? It is actually a pretty tough place in in its own way.*

Most of the participants had issues around typing assignments. Whilst there is flexibility for teachers to gather work in various ways, such as written, audio, illustration format, much of the assignments are limited to written format. This undoubtedly causes unrest amongst some students, particularly the mature learners who have spent a significant time away from formal learning. Paul outlines his struggle with typing.

> *I know what to write, but putting it to the computer…and it does take up more time if your not as skilled, you know what I mean? Like I'd rather write it down and hand it in but that's not the case you know?*

Jason also outlines the time it takes him to write and type his assignments.

> *I find the typing very hard… I really would like if I was able to handwrite it, because I have to handwrite it and then I have to type it out it takes up a lot of time and I'm really slow at my typing.*

Generally, the younger learners or school leavers are up-to date with their typing skills and consequently have little trouble with typing. On the contrary, many mature learners do not feel proficient to type and would much prefer to submit assignments via written format.

**5.5 Balance**

Unsurprisingly, most of the participants mentioned their difficulty maintaining a balance between college and family life and or other commitments. From my experience as a teacher, many mature learners have children or dependent others and so feel an added pressure as a result. Many of the participants suggested that such external responsibilities do not generally apply to school leavers who are often dependant on their parents/guardians until college is complete. This perceived contrast in responsibility causes frustration amongst participants towards their younger peers.

In the following excerpt, Lorraine tells of her external commitments and expresses frustration at her younger peers.

> *…And at times I have found that difficult… managing everything because that's the difficulty with a mature student, I do laugh at some of the younger ones, that go home and say ohh I went to bed...Jesus, I would love to go home and go to bed! I do say my day starts when I leave here!*

Patricia also supports the notion of frustration towards younger peers.

> *…Their reality is to go home… their mothers are there thinking for them…. they just relax and just watch TV or whatever, I'm still alone. I often sat down at half ten at night you know… or even a quarter to eleven, still not having what I had to get done…I had to drop it and that frustrates me because I want to get it done.*

This can lead to tensions in the classroom amongst mature and "traditional" learners who may be often labelled ungrateful by their older peers. This generalisation can often misrepresent the younger population in FE and lead to incorrect assumptions amongst mature students. It is my experience that in addition to mature learners, there are many "traditional" students who too have external commitments, such as a part-time job or even a parent or sibling to care for.

### 5.6 Digital competence

Many mature learners maintain the assumption that they have missed out on the rapidly growing technology era. This is true not only in education but in all areas of life including mobile phone technology, interacting with various types of social media and so forth. It is undeniable that technology does feature in much of our day to day living however the discourse surrounding technology may be creating more of a barrier than needed, especially amongst those who do not consider themselves competent in the area.

Lorraine effectively captures this fear of technology in the following extract.

> *I'm not an IT person, I never was an IT person, I would have done a little bit of IT, but even in the seven years I've done nothing, I mean in the last seven years I've hardly even looked at a computer.*

Similarly, Mary makes reference to the lack of computers available during her school days.

> *…I suppose even with computers like…whereas when I was in school we didn't really have computers do you know what I mean?*

Patricia further supports the fear experienced by older learners in relation to digital competence in FE.

> *...I found that very daunting because I do know how to use a laptop...it was my own at home and all and you can fiddle away with it and all that but all these things you have to follow on it…I was there going, what does she mean by that, what, what, what? I was just completely lost, you know what I mean like even sometimes putting in my password, I'm going, what is it again* [laughs] *you know? …Yeh I found that very daunting.*

Ben points out the generation gap in technology in relation to his younger peers.

> *…it's alright for the younger ones in the class, they seem to be more aware of it because they've grown up with it, whereas me I never had that…so like…technology has moved on so fast, for me it hasn't, for them, they're growing up with it so they are just flying… ah that's grand I know how to do that and I'm going where is it?...*

Most FE settings use computers for typing, and use online learning platforms such as Moodle or One-drive for downloading notes and storing information. As part of the full award, most students in FE are required to study Communications and sometimes Word Processing. Both of these modules are predominately computer-based and from my experience in teaching, tend to present the most issues to mature learners.

Paul supports this perception.

> *I thought the communications end of it was a shock… we mentioned it to our course head you know? And we had said the assignments had taken up a lot of the studying and he took note of it and says unfortunately the communication thing is compulsory you know?*

Similarly, Patricia recalls a conversation with her partner about her word processing module.

> *Out of the whole lot what is really annoying you my partner said to me one day, I says word processing is really annoying me just cant get enough time to do it you know?*

In relation to digital support from teachers, six participants (Mary, Ben, Jason, Eileen, Lorraine, Julie) reported receiving sufficient help when needed. Patricia recalls learning how to navigate her way around the college learning system in the first term.

> *…Yeh they showed me straight away yeh… he he's good, he showed me how to get in and sign onto Moodle and then em, who was it, oh* [Ann] *was good as well she's in communications, she's good at that as well, so then we got into that and knew how to save the One-drive and all that, got it done anyway, getting there.*

Lorraine and Paul also reported receiving sufficient support from their IT teachers.

> *He just puts you at ease…straight away and just key little things that are important when you're dealing with mature students.* (Lorraine)

> *The teachers know you're capable, you're willing and they're very... most of them are understanding and their very supportive that end you know? Which I find great you know, to anyone, not just the mature students.* (Paul)

It is important to note that participants seemed to be reflecting upon their issues with technology, rather than viewing it in a present light. By the time the interviews took place, all of the participants seemed to be relatively satisfied that they had developed at minimum, a basic digital competence.

### 5.7 Learning with younger peers

All participants intentionally and unintentionally remarked upon their time learning with younger peers. When asked about coming to FE, most of the participants felt that it reminded them of being in secondary school. Although half (Ben, Lorraine, Eileen, Julie) completed a course or degree after completing second level education, the accounts of coming to FE remained much the same for all participants. It appears that

secondary school was the most vivid frame of reference that participants had. Despite the sense of secondary school within FE settings, mature learners count for approximately half of those in the FE sector with those in their late teens or early twenties populating the remainder of spaces. However, the number of mature learners in a class is dependant on the course itself. For example, a healthcare assistant course tends to attract mostly mature learners who are looking to enter the workforce right away. On the contrary, a pre-nursing course is generally occupied by school leavers who are hoping to gain entry into third level education upon successful completion of their QQI level 5. This can mean that within the classroom, the ratio of mature learners to "traditional" learners can vary significantly and consequently, each class group is entirely unique in terms of the challenges faced. Six of the participants (Ben, Paul, Jason, Lorraine, Eileen, Julie) had at least one other mature learner in their class whilst two (Mary, Patricia) were the only mature learner in their class group. Mary did express their feelings of isolation at times.

> *I don't have any sort of group of people that I would sort of be in a group with, you know what I mean? I just sort of talk to everybody as best I can…I suppose it would be nice to have other people maybe of a similar sort of background, where they haven't been in a learning environment in a long time em, even just to say, I found that really hard…. because its been so long since I've had to learn anything off...I suppose just something like that, to sort of vent.*

Similarly, Patricia recalls feeling like an outsider in relation to the rest of her class group.

> *I found it hard to get to know your younger groups…I felt as if I am independent but sometimes I don't like to be felt as if I'm on me own either like you know?... So then when I do say something to them, they'd be shocked at me…like even Justin Bieber... I said something about him the other day and they were like looking at me as if I had two heads like* [laughs]*, like I am human,* [laughs]*, I do live in this earth with you!*

Despite having other mature learners in their class, Jason commented on feeling of segregated from his younger peers.

> *Of course I felt a little bit singled out but not in any way did it affect my mental state like you know? I didn't get annoyed by it or, I didn't react to it you know? I just let it be which I always have done in any situation.*

Paul also commented upon his younger peers as a "pack", indicating a fear towards them collectively.

> "*So I think its because they're teenagers, they're obviously gonna have their own little pack which is fair enough".*

It is clear that both Patricia and Mary were lacking relatedness with others in the class setting and despite Mary's efforts to "talk to everybody" she clearly longs for a connection with a similar aged peer. Patricia uses the term "them" and "they" which was also used by all of the other participants. This is suggestive of a "them" versus "us" or "me" nature and illustrates the tensions that can emerge between mature learners and traditional learners in the classroom. Speaking about these tensions in more detail, Ben states;

> *It's like they're afraid to catch old, do you know? Its like we have something* [laughs]*...We can't talk to them, its not cool. Some of them are mature enough to talk to us and have the craic with us, but some of them feel, no its not cool to be talking to the older people you know?*

Later, Ben comments on how his fellow mature learners help to deal with his feelings of isolation from his younger peers.

> *But eh no we've our own little group and it keeps us going, like if one of us is having a hard time we tend to prop each other up, you know? Which is very important, it is, it makes us, like there's times where I didn't wanna come in but I go ah no I'll go in.*

Jason also comments on learning with younger peers, making reference to secondary school.

> *They've chosen their friends* [laughs] *and their groups you know? …Which is something you see in school and you're just like, it's a bit strange. It was just a really young crowd and it, I don't wanna keep touching on that but it just seemed like they were just there for a laugh you know what I mean, not there to learn, whereas I was there to learn and it was just a distraction, for me like, you know?*

For Eileen, it seems that the discourse and behaviour of her younger peers affect her most in FE.

> *The conversations in the room you know? You're just going Jesus Christ!* [laughs]. *That has been difficult and em just their whole mis-behaviour and lack of tolerance big time on my behalf really.*

Similarly, Julie makes reference to childish behaviour amongst her younger peers and highlights her frustration when they are allowed to submit late assignments.

> *Like some of them need to like to cop on like getting stuff done... I think they think it's just gonna be like this in college, that they can be a few days late with an assignment and you know there might be a bit of scolding…so there is a bit of naivety there with some of them, but then they're eighteen or nineteen years old so I suppose you have to kind of understand that.*

It is clear that the participants viewed themselves in a different light to their younger peers and many held the assumption that they were in a similar role to that of a parent observing their children.

As Lorraine recalls:

> *I remember sitting in CAD the first week…. I'm saying what button will I push? Will I do this, will I do that?, and then you've a guy beside me who's playing a game, do ya know? And I'm saying this, do you not realise that this is a wonderful opportunity? They live in a technology world. I see my daughter, it's just, the day of discussion is gone!!... Errm and even an attempt at a discussion is very difficult, it's actually quite frightening where we're going.*

Paul also draws upon his own daughter when talking about his younger peers.

> *Obviously its a bit eh daunting for them but I found it all...the only daunting thing I thought is, is right...we've hormonal teenagers here, I know what they're like because of me daughter…but em surprisingly enough… they're grand like they're quite mature, I was surprised like, well you, obviously you get the odd hiccup in the class of dossin and messin and talkin!*

For Patricia, the large age gap between herself and her younger peers has resulted in her assuming the role of "mammy" in the class.

> *It was overwhelming because I'm the oldest in my class, and the youngest is seventeen…and I'm in me forties like you know?… so even to mix with younger, like they're children in my eyes, I could be their mother… they called me the mammy of the group because they kind of look and say well* [Patricia's] *not bothered with it so why should we be bothered with it like…*

These excerpts provide an insight into the lived realities of FE classrooms, and illustrate the frustrations many mature learners can experience toward their younger peers. Feeling like an outsider and classroom disruptions were the main issues raised by participants, with age and immaturity emerging as the causal factors. Eileen tells of the difficulty teachers face when dealing with such issues in the classroom:

> *The younger ones…* [Louise] *is pulling them along literally pulling some of them along whereas the matures I'd say would love more out of* [Louise] *and she's probably trying to keep a balance in the room because she cant fly on either, you know that kind of way?*

On the contrary to the previous exchanges, all of the participants still reported feelings of admiration and respect for their younger peers. Later, Eileen states;

> *Some of them in the room are very talented … they have different ideas than someone my age would have.*

Patricia also comments on her admiration for the way her younger peers operate in college.

> *You get to the way they start thinking and go oh my god they're so right don't be taking it to heart you know…because I would worry about more things that they would and they seem to just breeze along and I do say to them I'm gonna take a leaf out of their book.*

Lorraine describes how she questioned herself when comparing her artwork with her younger peers.

> *There was the kind of fear, ya know? Will I be as good or will I be able to be at the same standard?*

The participants' accounts suggest that an inner conflict exists, between their perceived view of studying with younger peers and their actual one. There appears to be a desire for approval amongst their younger peers, as seen in Patricia's efforts to engage using the medium of Justin Bieber. The previous exchanges indicate that participants do care about how they were viewed by their younger peers despite referring to them as "children" or "teenagers" multiple times. The participants are indicating that they do look up to their younger peers in terms of their ability to succeed in FE. The previous accounts deliver an impression that many mature learners may in actual fact wish to become more like their younger peers in terms of their creativity and academic competence. Patricia's claim that she is "gonna take a leaf out of their book" as well as Lorraine's longing to "be at the same standard" support the desirous notion depicted.

In addition, an inner conflict seem to emerge from both Paul and Patricia, who on the one hand expressed the desire to remain independent and on the other revealed signs of dependency upon their younger peers for academic support. Paul's account below depicts his dependency on his younger peers despite earlier attempts to discredit or undermine them as "hormonal teenagers".

*Plus your getting ideas off them too and it's it's nice to give them a few ideas you know?...And obviously what your knowledge is you try and pass on a bit and then you listen to theirs and you go oh jaysus is that right?*

Patricia too conveys a sense of dependency:

*I think they're all great like you know I mean, to me they're there to help ya like you know?*

To some extent Paul and Patricia may have been internally struggling to separate themselves from their secondary level dependencies. At the same time, earlier accounts demonstrate that the process of adulthood is leading them to become more autonomous and self-directed. This conflict of needs may well be representative of an internal tension between dependence and inter-dependence that existed for them during their time in FE.

**5.8 Support group**

It became apparent from the interviews that my interpretation of the word "support" was different to that of the participants. I asked the participants to comment on whether a mature learner "support" group would be of any benefit to them. My intentions for such a group would be to connect mature learners with one another, especially those who may be feeling isolated in their class, so that they could share experiences and perhaps resources too. Initially I was surprised at Paul and Lorraine's suspicious reaction to the suggestion. Paul responded almost immediately stating "I wouldn't need a support group…I wouldn't think…" whilst Lorraine was more curious to find out

what I meant exactly, “now, ehh...when you say a support group?” Upon reflection, it seems obvious why Paul and Lorraine responded defensively to my question. To suggest “support” may have indicated to them that they were viewed as incapable of learning independently by the interviewer. Once I clarified the intention of the group, that was to facilitate an informal meet up amongst mature learners, both participants seemed more relaxed to discuss it. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt by Lorraine.

> *Ok ehh, I would see no difficulty with that… cause I think it would be nice to sit down with, and I think that’s why as I say em, what’s been enjoyable has been two other women in the group, around my own age, one older one younger, like eh we meet up for coffee every day and we’ve kind of gelled as a unit, even within the group… and I would say that’s been a big support for me.*

Two other participants, Jason and Mary, also thought that it would be a good idea to set up a mature learner group. Jason illustrates his excitement for the idea in the following extract.

> *...Probably! yeh yeh yeh, I'd say so yeh definitely. Definitely do some with some sort of I don't know even counselling for the mature students or something you know, support group yeh that'd be great yeh!*

Mary also expresses some enthusiasm for the idea.

> *...I suppose it would be nice to have em like somewhere to…like just other people, maybe of a similar sort of background where they haven’t been in a learning environment in a long time em, even just, to say I found that really hard because its been so long since I've had to learn anything off or had to you know? I suppose just something like that to sort of vent!*

On the other hand, Patricia did not feel that a mature learner support group would be beneficial to her.

> *...No I think that would segregate us a wee bit more because in a way that would just say, separate ya too much from the younger groups because eh ya*

*have to interact with the younger groups because there's more of them here than there is mature student's…*

Similarly, Ben also felt that a mature learner group would segregate him from the rest of his class group.

*…Then you risk eh, segregation kind of, you're putting them in a box that there's actually a group, you wouldn't go round and say there's this group for women to go to, to see someone, it's a generalisation, so you're probably better off keeping it just as a guidance counsellor, not an actual separate...do you get what I'm saying?*

Five of the participants (Ben, Paul, Eileen, Patricia, Julie) stated that a mature learner support group would be damaging in terms of segregation from their younger peers. On the contrary, the remaining three participants (Mary, Lorraine, Jason) did support the idea of a mature learner group, highlighting relatedness to others as the most appealing factor.

**5.9 Conclusion**

This chapter presented a view of the findings as they emerged in themes. The sequencing of themes reflected both the interview structure and the emergence of data from participants. The findings revealed that while all of the participants displayed an intrinsic desire to learn, a trigger of some form appeared to be what actually motivated them to take action. Recent unemployment was the trigger point for five participants, with three acting due to changes to the family structure. All of the participants reported positive feelings towards their course choice and seemed excited to discuss this during the interviews. When asked to recall the first-term, a fear of failure started to emerge, at varying degrees. Some participants explicitly stated their fears of failure, often

making reference to their negative experiences in secondary school. For others the fear of failure emerged more as a subtle theme throughout the interview. In terms of assessments, all of the participants did state that they had a large workload, however none indicated falling behind in any particular area. This brought to light the question about whether participants were using the topic of assessment more as a medium to gain respect from others. It was clear that during the first-term, digital incompetence did emerge as an issue for the majority of participants. This incompetence was attributed to a gap in generations, which participants felt they were part of.

As the interviews progressed, a clear tension emerged from mature students about their assumptions about their younger peers in terms of external commitments and behaviour in FE. It seems that the preconceived assumptions about younger peers were more damaging to participants than the reality of learning with them. Interestingly, the suggestion of a mature learner support group attracted responses from two extremes. Some participants seemed quite enthusiastic about the notion, whilst others thought it would be damaging to the mature learner population. In the next chapter, these findings will be discussed further and situated within a wider theoretical context.

# Chapter 6- Discussion and recommendations

## 6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the motivation of mature students who were coming to FE for the first time. In addition, I hoped to uncover any significant challenges experienced by mature learners in relation to, confidence, assessments, digital competence and learning with younger peers. The findings of the study indicate that all participants were motivated to come to FE and that unemployment and a change in family structure were the main triggers in prompting action. In relation to confidence, a fear of academic failure emerged amongst all participants to varying degrees. Considering some reports of a heavy workload, there was no evidence to suggest that participants had any substantial issues with completing their assessments more than other students. This is not to say that participants found the assessments easy, rather that they spent significant time after college studying and completing work. Similarly, while digital incompetence emerged as a theme, there was no evidence to suggest that this was hindering the student's overall academic performance. Again, this may be a result of over working to keep up. A tension between parent and peer emerged which is consistent with research carried out by O'Boyle (2014). Surprisingly, the majority of participants felt that a mature learner support group would segregate them from their younger peers, despite earlier accounts of feeling isolated and seeking relatedness with others. I will situate the findings in a wider theoretical context and draw upon existing literature to support my argument. The layout of this chapter is similar to the previous one, with each theme presented separately.

### 6.2 Motivated

In terms of motivation, the findings were multifaceted. All participants displayed intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn. Passion and interest in the subject area took precedence in participant accounts of how they came to college. This is consistent with McCune et al.'s (2010) study of mature students, which identified personal growth and interest as the main reasons for returning to education (p. 701). While this was the case, all participants indicated that some sort of incident was responsible for leading them to FE at this time. Recent unemployment and changes to family structure seemed to be the key triggers that led the participants to take action and come to FE. Those who were mothers (Eileen, Lorraine, Patricia) attributed their take up in education to the fact that their children had now grown to their teens and were more independent. Research by Fragosa et al. (2013) support this finding and suggest that women view the age of their children to be important when deciding upon whether to return to learning or not (p. 72). Furthermore, McCune et al. (2013) point out that women are less likely to engage in education when their children are young (p. 699).

### 6.3 Fear of failure

A fear of academic failure emerged amongst all of the participants to some extent. All except Lorraine made reference to negative secondary school experiences when describing current fears in FE. Despite being away from education, it seems that FE brought back these negative schooling memories and gave rise to an academic insecurity. Numerous researchers (Briedenhann, 2007, Fleming & McKee, 2005, Fragosa et al., 2013, Hardiman, 2014, Walters, 2000, Willans & Seary, 2011) recognise low confidence as a barrier for many mature students in education and attribute this to

a negative academic background. Interestingly, most of the participants (except Lorraine who neither reported good or bad experiences) felt an onus to confess their prior unhappiness in education before discussing their present experience. For educators, it may be important to give mature students the opportunity to talk about their academic background at the beginning rather than leaving it undisclosed. In addition, it seems that the impact of getting older was a concern to some participants (Ben, Paul, Julie) who identified fears relating to memory deterioration and learning capabilities. Paul's exchange is telling of this fear, "I feel obviously at my age I need to properly practice on it you know, like memory cells kind of fail a bit". Research by Hardiman (2012) supports this finding and draws upon two important milestones that can influence future esteem and confidence amongst students. These include: the first assignment and the first feedback given to the student by the teacher. Assessment of work can pose a risk to some students who may fear being judged. This fear of judgement may lead to "consequences for self-esteem and confidence in what is still a new environment" (Hardiman, 2012, p. 150). It is important for educators to be aware of the influence of their feedback on the self-esteem of others, particularly those with perceived low self-esteem. Teachers should provide affirmation to students about their abilities in order to help them in their "important transition in their recognition of themselves as entitled to be in the college pursuing this activity" (Hardiman, 2012, p. 150). Another concept Hardiman (2012) drew upon was the idea of risk in education. Attending college is a "non-normative" decision for many mature students who are often putting their identity and self-esteem on the line and may feel exposed in this regard (p. 151). Cushman (2004) highlights that mature students are more likely than

"traditional" students to experience anxieties and fears in academia if they have had a break from education, (p. 303).

### 6.4 Assessments and digital competence

In relation to assessments, most of the participants reported feeling surprised and shocked at the perceived high workload in FE. Three participants, (Eileen, Lorraine, Patricia) used descriptive words (such as "colossal" and "massive") to depict how overwhelmed they felt at the beginning. Cushman (2004) points out that many students may underestimate the expectancies of college, which in turn can lead to negative "implications for success" (p. 301). Most level 5 and 6 courses in FE are heavily occupied by continuous assessments, usually in the form of typed assignments. Most students participate in at least eight modules, which means that there is often overlap in due dates amongst various modules. This can lead to a certain level of surprise amongst all students but particularly mature students who are likely to have spent time away from formal learning. It seems that in the beginning the participants found it difficult to adjust to the assessment part of the transition, which may be a result of false expectancies. Julie illustrates her lack of foresight towards FE and claims "it is actually a pretty tough place". Her exchange captures her newfound opinion of FE, "I suppose in terms of appreciating Further Education like I would, I'd have more admiration for it that I don't think it gets, do you know?" When asked to expand further, most participants indicated experiencing difficulties with typing work and reported feeling behind in this regard. This finding is consistent with Hardiman's (2012) study, which also identified typing to be a barrier for mature students in FE (p. 119). In the present study, some participants reported working extra hard to keep up with their assignments

however there appeared to be no indication that any participant was behind in any of their submissions. Cushman (2004) notes that, despite having significant demands, mature students may have "developed better time management skills that generalise to a tertiary context" (p. 302). It is important for educators to acknowledge the difficulties some students may face in relation to typing written work and perhaps identify with those who struggle most at the beginning of the year. In FE, most students participate in the module "Communications" as part of their overall award. Communications is predominately computer based and involves the frequent use of Microsoft Word to create resumes, e-mails and other written documents. Most participants reported receiving sufficient support from their communications teacher, whom inadvertently helped them to develop the digital literacy skills needed in other modules.

### 6.5 Learning with younger peers

It was evident that a tension existed in participants' dual feelings towards their younger peers. All participants seemed to follow a similar pattern when talking about their time learning with younger peers. Comments such as "singled out", "own little pack" and "afraid to catch old" surfaced early in most exchanges, and it seems that to some extent, all participants felt segregated at times from their younger peers. Having another mature student in the class seemed to have little bearing on this finding with all participants reporting feelings of isolation at times. Participants identified age as the main cause of segregation, with references to feeling like "the mammy" or parent to "hormonal teenagers" made. Large age gaps are characteristic of FE, which as noted earlier, attracts as many school-leavers in their teens as it does adults in their twenties

and beyond. This differs to HE, where mature learners account for only fifteen per cent of those enrolled in full-time education (HEA, 2016).

The lack of relatedness with others may be thought of in the context of Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory, which identifies an innate need in people to seek relatedness with others in their social context. This may help to explain why, despite making references to negative behaviours (such as talking in class, not taking the class serious and handing in assignments late) the participants still expressed a desire to form a connection with their younger peers. This is seen in Patricia's attempt to use "Justin Bieber" as a means of forming a connection with her classmates. Furthermore, O'Boyle (2014) uses the terms "outsider and insider" and "parent and peer" to conceptualise the "dialectic" contradiction that emerged from his study of mature students in HE (p. 177). Similar to the findings of the present study, the "outsider and insider" concept represents the "feelings of differentness" that "are typically induced in particular social encounters or in particular conversational moments" (p. 180). This may mean that, despite taking part in college life, "they [mature students] are never fully integrated into it" (p. 177). In addition, O'Boyle (2014) uses the "parent and peer" term to describe the second more inconspicuous contradiction that emerged among mature students. This contradiction identifies how students "felt shunted into positions of authority, despite their own reservations" (p. 180), which is congruent with the present findings. It may be the case that younger peers, "on account of age" expect mature students to gravitate towards positions of authority and that they perceive mature students to be "naturally equipped" to assume such roles (O'Boyle, 2014, p. 180). Nonetheless, the findings of the present study

suggest that the contradiction in perceived roles gave way to feelings of frustration and insecurity among participants.

The existing literature has proved useful (Deci & Ryan 1985, O'Boyle, 2014) when seeking to understand why the majority of participants were somewhat hesitant towards participating in a mature learner support group. It seems that the notion of a mature learner support group, while on the one hand may offer opportunities to connect with people of a similar age, may consequently become a significant barrier to achieving relatedness within the current social context. In addition, the word "support" appeared to be problematic in its take up as needing support by participants. Perhaps an alternative term such as "network" may have sufficed in this instance.

### 6.6 Conclusion

The present chapter presented and discussed how participants felt about coming to FE and what led them there in the first place. I wanted to gain rich insights into the workings of participants' minds to try to understand the context that they have found themselves in. Exploring the motivation of participants has undoubtedly proved useful in understanding such contexts. While the realities of everyday life (such as unemployment) prompted the process of FE for most, the underlying current tells of a different narrative, one that is much more "intrinsic" and passion based. My second focus of enquiry was to explore the challenges faced during the first term in relation to confidence, assessments, digital competence and learning with younger peers. This enquiry has also been valuable in constructing and making meaning from participants' transition to FE. A lack of academic confidence and contradiction of feelings towards

younger peers were by far the most significant results for participants. In addition, participants seemed to underestimate the workload and found the transition difficult in this regard. Considering external commitments, preparation for workload may be crucial in softening the transition to FE for mature students. Similarly, it seemed that while most participants did report that they were gradually improving their digital literacy, they felt that it set them aside from their younger cohort who have "grown up" in a technology era. This perceived separateness from younger peers seemed to move beyond the confines of technology into other spaces including: feeling like a parent rather than peer; feeling less academic that from the younger cohort who were perceived to be academically sharper and feeling more experienced in life than the younger cohort who were often perceived to be lacking in appreciation for their time in FE. The results highlight the importance of the transition to FE for some who often feel like they are risking or exposing their identity to others. According to Knowles (1998), "nothing makes an adult feel more childlike than being judged by another adult" (p. 60). It is important that educators pay attention to such complexities in order to enhance the student experience and improve the knowledge and practice within the FE sector.

### 6.7 Recommendations

In looking ahead there are some areas for consideration in relation to identifying and enhancing the student experience in FE. Some of the suggestions for future practice include:

- Providing an opportunity at the beginning of the academic year to meet individually with students as a means for them to share prior experiences in

education. This may help students', particularly mature students who may feel that they are "hiding" prior negative learning encounters.

- Perhaps educators could use the findings to establish relatedness between all students in the initial phase in college. This may mean setting up learning scenarios so that mature students do not automatically assume the "parent" role in class activities which may help to balance the perceived divide in roles amongst student. O'Boyle supports this suggestion and outlines that such activities "may help to generate greater intergroup understanding" (p. 189).
- It may be important for educators to provide early affirmation to students about their work. Early feedback may serve to be beneficial to the esteem and success of the student throughout the year as outlined previously in this chapter.
- It may be useful to summarise the main findings of this study (such as fear of failure, shock at high workload, difficulties with I.T and feeling like an "outsider and insider") and present them in a clear way to all students. Knowing the experiences of others in FE may benefit students and may even help to reduce academic fears or uncertainty. Likewise it may be beneficial for younger peers to identify with the experiences of mature students as a means of forming a common ground in the learning context.

# Chapter 7 –Limitations, areas for future research and conclusion

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter details the conclusions from the study, which explored the transitional experiences of mature students in an Irish FE setting. This chapter also sets out to consider any limitations of the present study, to suggest areas for further study and provides an overall conclusion to this dissertation.

## 7.2 Limitations

The present research was confined to one FE college with a unique set of demographics. In addition, this research was not representative of the mature learner population, however this was acknowledged earlier in the process. Instead the research is an accurate account of the experiences of the mature learners who participated in the interviews. Similar research in another FE setting might yield different findings, perhaps as a result of different college demographics. Whilst the present findings were analysed and separated into meaningful themes as a means of answering the research questions, it must be noted that they are not representative of anything outside this particular context.

## 7.3 Future research opportunities

There were a number of areas in this study that indicated future research opportunities. Firstly, it seems that while this study captured the experiences of eight mature students in FE, it failed to capture those who had already dropped out. It may be quite important

to carry out future research with mature learners who drop out during the first term, to further our understanding as to why this has occurred. With increasing policy attention towards participation and retention in education, it seems relevant to explore those who have left early and uncover their reasons why. Secondly, I feel that future research could incorporate methods that would be representative of the mature learner population. This may include using quantitative research methods when seeking to represent the mature learner population in FE. For example, it would be interesting to see if a fear of academic failure does exist among the mature student population in FE. A large-scale questionnaire could be distributed to specifically explore this question and may provide further clarity and validity than other means.

### 7.4 Conclusion

In setting out on this research journey, I carried out an extensive review of existing literature and discovered the various elements that constitute adult learning. Despite being heavily occupied by those over 21 years, a gap emerged from the research specific to mature learners in an Irish FE setting. I was intrigued to discover the experiences of mature learners who often present themselves to me as being somewhat unexplained. The capacity for qualitative research (particularly interviews) to reach deep into the human experience made this choice of methodology seem straightforward. My research questions (to explore the motivation of mature students in FE; and to find out if mature students experience significant challenges in relation to, assessments, confidence, digital competence and learning with younger peers) all led me away from wanting to provide numerical expressions of data, toward a strong desire to provide rich interpretations and representations of findings.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the findings were congruent with much of existing literature surrounding mature students. Mezirow's transformational learning theory (1978) (as identified in chapter 3) is a useful way to conceptualise the influence that FE had on participants in the present study. Self-questioning of prior meanings, beliefs and dispositions meant that participants may have embarked much more on a personal journey than previously expected.

I hope this research will help to enhance the knowledge of my colleagues and the wider FE community about the lived experiences of mature students who transition to FE. In addition, it is hoped that other practitioners will consider the recommendations from this study when seeking to enhance the mature learner experience. The findings of this study indicate that while the students were motivated to come to FE, they were unprepared for the high workload, experienced difficulties with digital literacy and experienced contradictions in their feelings towards younger students. It is important that educators are sensitive to the needs of students and work to uncover the multi-faceted experiences that they encounter.

This research has brought about a critical reflection of my own practice as an educator and helped me to understand my own educational values and beliefs. I believe that the chosen methodology was student-centered and afforded me the opportunity to immerse myself in the lived experiences of mature students.

## References


Adler, PA., Adler, P. (1987). *Membership roles in field research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

AONTAS, (2016). *Adult Education in Ireland.* Retrieved from, http://www.aontas.com/information/howtogetinvolved.html

AONTAS, (2012). *Finance and lack of suitable courses are the two biggest challenges facing adults returning to education.* Retrieved from, http://www.aontas.com/newsandevents/latestnews/2012/11/14/finance-and-lack-of-suitable-courses-are-the-two-b/

Bartunek, J., & Louis, M. (1996). *Insider/outsider team research.* Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage.

Bedel, E. F. (2016). Exploring academic motivation, academic self-efficacy and attitudes toward teaching in pre-service early childhood education teachers. *Journal of education and training studies*, *4*(1), 142-149. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Briedenhann, J. (2007). The mature student experience in higher education: From the Horses mouth. *The International Journal of Learning*, *14*(2), 266-273. Retrieved from http://www.Learning-Journal.com

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Buck, S., and McGinn, K., (2005). *Initial Vocational Education and Training in Ireland*. Draft report prepared by FÁS on behalf of Cedefop in accordance with Cedefop guidelines, 1-64, Library and Information Resource Centre, April 2016. Retrieved from http://www.fas.ie/en/pubdocs/InitialVocationalEducationTraining2005.pdf

Carroll, D. & Patterson, V. (2011). *A profile of undergraduate mature new entrants*. Dublin: HEA.

Carter, B. (2008). Dewey, the OECD and differing discourses of 'lifelong learning'. *New Zealand Journal Of Adult Learning*, *36*(2), 110-115. Retrieved from EBSCO*host*

Chapman, A. (2016). A (re)negotiation of identity: From 'mature student' to 'novice academic. *Widening Participation And Lifelong Learning*, *14*(3), 44-60. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

Cheng, Y., & Yeh, H. (2009*).* From concepts of motivation to its application in instructional design: Reconsidering motivation from an instructional design perspective*. British Journal Of Educational Technology, 40*(4), 597-605. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2008.00857.x

Christensen, L., & Evamy, S. (2011). MAPs to success: Improving the first year experience of alternative entry mature age students. *The International Journal Of The First Year In Higher Education, 2*(2). DOI: /10.5204/intjfyhe.v2i2.83

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Oxfordshire: Routledge.

Cooley, A. (2013). Qualitative research in education: The origins, debates, and politics of creating knowledge. *Educational Studies*, *49*(3), 247-262. doi:10.1080/00131946.2013.783834

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches,* 2nd Edition. Sage.

Cushman, P. (2016). Juggling priorities: A comparison of young and mature age students' use of time during their first semester of teacher education. *Waikato Journal Of Education*, *10*, 300-313. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11,* 227–268. doi:10.1207/ S15327965PLI1104_01

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1991). A motivational approach to self: Integration in personality. In R. Diensthier (Ed.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation: Perspectives on motivation* (Vol. 38, pp. 237–288). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (1985). The general causality orientations scale: self-determination in personality. *Journal of research in personality, 19*, 109-134. doi: 10.1016/00926 566(85)90023-6.

Deci, E. L., Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Ryan, R. M. (1991). Motivation and education: A self-determination perspective. *Educational Psychologist*, *26*(3-4), 325–346. Retrieved from EBSCO*host*

Delors, J. (1996). Learning: the Treasure Within. Paris: UNESCO.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). (Eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Department of Education and Science (2000). Learning for life: White paper on adult education. Dublin: Government Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (1995). Charting our education future: White Paper on Education. Dublin: Government Stationery Office.

Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: on being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal Of Qualitative Methods*, *8*(1), 54-63. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

Dwyer, T. (2013). A case study on the impact of the classroom on the intention to persist 30 among non-traditional students. In *How equal? Access to Higher Education in Ireland research papers*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority. Retrieved from http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/how_equal_0.pdf

Edwards, J. (2012). We need to talk about epistemology: Orientations, meaning, and interpretation within music therapy research. *Journal of Music Therapy, 49*(4), 372-394. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

Faure, E., Herrera, F., Kaddoura, A.-R., Lopes, H., Petrovsky, A., Rahnema, M., & Champion-Ward, F. (1972). *Learning to be; The world of education today and tomorrow.* Paris: UNESCO Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000018/001801e.pdf

Fadyl, J. K., & Nicholls, D. A. (2013). Foucault, the subject and the research interview: A critique of methods. *Nursing Inquiry*, *20*(1), 23-29. doi:10.1111/nin.12011

Fleming, S. and McKee, G. (2005) The mature student question. *Nurse Education Today*. *25*(3), pp. 230-237. Retrieved from http://eprints.teachingandlearning.ie/2271/

Fleming, T. and Murphy, M. (1998) *College knowledge: power, policy and the mature student experience at University,* Maynooth: MACE.

Fragosa, A., Goncalves, T., Ribeiro, M., Monteiro, R., Quintas, H., & Bago, J. et al. (2013). The transition of mature students to higher education: challenging traditional concepts. *Studies In the education of adults*, *45*(1), 67-81. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266146138_The_transition_of_mature_students_to_higher_ education_Challenging_traditional_concepts

Gould, R. (1978). *Transformations: Growth and change in adult life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hannan, D. and Boyle M. (1987). *Schooling decisions: The origins and consequences of selection and streaming in Irish post-primary schools.* Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute.

Hardiman, F. (2012). *Finding a voice: The experience of mature students in a college of Further Education* (Ph. D. thesis, National University of Maynooth, Ireland). Retrieved from http://eprints.maynoothuniversity.ie/3908/1/F._Hardiman_Thesis.pdf

Harlan, E. (2015). Later life learning transitions. *Global education journal*, *2015*(2), 153-160. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

Hellawell, D. (2006). Inside-out: Analysis of the insider-outsider concept as a heuristic device to develop reflexivity in students doing qualitative research. *Teaching in higher education,* 11, (4) 483-494. Retrieved from ERIC.

Henderson, K. A. (2011). Post-positivism and the pragmatics of leisure research. *Leisure Sciences, 33*(4), 341-346. doi:10.1080/01490400.2011.583166

Hofer, B., Pintrich, P., (2009). *Personal Epistemology: the psychology about beliefs about knowledge and knowing*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hurley, K. (2015). Equality and human capital: Conflicting concepts within state-funded adult education in Ireland. *Adult learner: The Irish journal of adult and community education*, 15-29.

Inglis, T. & Murphy, M. (1999). *No room for adults? A study of mature students in University College Dublin*. Dublin: Social Science Research Centre and the Adult Education Office, UCD.

Jackson, R. (2011). The Interpretive approach as a research tool: Inside the REDCo project. *British Journal of religious education*, *33* (2), 189-208. Retrieved from, http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/01416200.asp

Jakobi, A. (2009). *International organizations and lifelong learning: From global agendas to policy diffusion.* Palgrave, Macmillan: UK.

James, D. (1995) Mature studentship in higher education: beyond a 'species' approach [Online]. *British journal of sociology of education. 16*(4), pp. 451-466. DOI: 10.1080/0142569950160402

Jarvis, P. (2010). *The Routledge International handbook of lifelong learning*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Kirk, J., & Miller, M. L. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Klatt, J., & Ray, R. (2014). Student academic outcomes after completing a first-year seminar. *NACTA Journal*, 58(1-4), 290-294. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

Knowles, M. (1998). Andragogy: An emerging technology for adult learning. In R. Edwards & A. Hanson (Eds.), *Boundaries of adult learning. London:* Routledge.

Kvale, S. (2006). Dominance through interviews and dialogues. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(3), 480-500. DOI: 10.1177/1077800406286235

Levinson, D. (1978) *The seasons of a man's life*, New York: Knopf.

Liston, M., Frawley, D., Patterson, V. (2016). *A study of progression in Irish higher education 2012/13 To 2013/14.* A report by the Higher Education Authority January 2016: Higher Education Authority. Retrieved from http://www.hea.ie/news/hea-study-highlights-84-students-progressed-their-2nd-year-study

McCune, V., Hounsell, J., Christie, H., Cree, V. E. and Tett, L. (2010). Mature and younger students' reasons for making the transition from further education into higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *15*(6), 691-702.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.507303

McGuinness, S., Bergin, A., Kelly, K., McCoy, S., Smyth, E., Whelan, A., Banks, J. (2014). *Further Education and training in Ireland: past, present and future.* The Economic and Social Research Institute. Retrieved from https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS35.pdf.

Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28(2), 100−110. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202

Mezirow, J. (1990). How critical thinking triggers transformative learning, pp.1-12. Retrieved from http://www.ln.edu.hk/osl/conference2011/output/breakout/4.4 %5Bref%5DHow Critical Reflection triggers Transformative Learning - Mezirow.pdf

Mezirow, J. (1991a). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning* .San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2009). *Transformative learning theory.* In J. Mezirow, J.& E .W.Taylor, (Eds.),Transformative learning in practice (p. 18-32) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J.,& Associates, (2000). Learning as transformation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Munro, L. (2011). "Go boldly, dream large!": The challenges confronting non-traditional students at university. *Australian journal of education*, 55(2). Retrieved from http://research.acer.edu.au/aje/vol55/iss2/3

Murphy, M., and Fleming, T. (2000). Between common and college knowledge: Exploring the boundaries between adult and higher education. *Studies in continuing education*. *22*(1). Retrieved from: http://www.tedfleming.net/doc/Studies_in_Continuing_Education.pdf

O'Boyle, N., (2014) Front row friendships: Relational dialectics and identity negotiations by mature students at university. *Communication education*. *63*(3), 169-191, DOI: 10.1080/03634523.2014.903333.

OECD. (2011). *Project overcoming school failure: Policies that work*. National Report, Ireland. Department of Education and Skills. April 2016. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/ireland/49624509.pdf

OECD (1996), *Lifelong learning for all*, OECD, Paris.

O'Reilly, E., N., (2014). Correlations among perceived autonomy support, intrinsic motivation, and learning outcomes in and intensive foreign language program. *Theory and practice in language studies*, *4*(7), 1313-1318.

Pavlov, I. P. (1927). *Conditional reflexes*. London: Oxford University Press.

Parsons, C. (2010). *Constructivism and interpretive theory*. In Marsh, D., Stoker, G. Editor (Ed.), Theory and methods in political science (pp.80-98). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ramsay, S.,Jones, E., & Barker, M. (2006). Relationship between adjustment and support types: Young and mature-aged local and international first year university students. *Higher education*, (54), 247-265. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-006-9001-0

Reay, D., Ball, S., & David, M. (2002). It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end': mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British educational research journal*, *28*(1), 6-19. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920120109711

Richards, L. (2015). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rooney, P. (2005). *Researching from the inside: does it compromise validity? A discussion.* Level 3. (3) Retrieved from: www.level3.dit.ie/html/issue3/rooney/rooney1.html

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2002). Overview of self-determination theory: An organismic-dialectical perspective. In E. L. Deci & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Handbook of self-determination research* (pp. 3– 33). Rochester, NY: The University of Rochester Press.

Schwartz-Shea, P., and Yanow, D. (2012). *Interpretive research design*. New York: Routledge.

Sheehy, G. (1974). *Passages: Predictable crises of adult life*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Sheridan, I., Linehan, M. (2009). *Recognition of prior learning: A focus on practice*. CIT Press, Bishopstown, Cork, Ireland.

Sin, C. (2014). Epistemology, sociology, and learning and teaching in physics. *Science education, 98*(2), 342-365.

Skinner, B. F. (1938). *The behavior of organisms: an experimental analysis.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

SOLAS. (2015). *The 2015 Further Education and Training services plan.* SOLAS FET operational planning and stakeholder engagement unit, 4-64. Retrieved from http://www1.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SOLAS_FET_Services_Plan_2015.pdf

SOLAS. (2014). *Further Education and Training strategy 2014-2019.* SOLAS, 1-156. Retrieved from, http://www.solas.ie/docs/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf

Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2013). Time, money, leisure and guilt – the gendered challenges of higher education for mature-age students. *Australian journal of adult learning*, *53*(1), 96-116. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

The National Quality Authority Ireland, (2005*). Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in Further and Higher education and training*, 1-16. Retrieved from http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/NQAI Guidelines and Principles for RPL.pdf

The Univeristy Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN), (2016). *Section A: NFQ architecture and the characteristics of Higher Education programmes that it recognises*. Retrieved from, http://www.nfqnetwork.ie

Thorndike, E. L. (1898). Animal intelligence: an experimental study of the associate process in animals. *Psychological review monograph supplement*, 2, 8.

Townsend, R. (2010). Developing 21st century diverse adult learning: rural and regional student access, progression and success in Higher Education. *The international journal of learning*, *17*(2), 330-341. Retrieved from http://www.Learning-Journal.com

Tuckman, B. W., & Kennedy, G. J. (2011). Teaching learning strategies to increase success of first-term college students. *Journal of experimental education*, *79*(4), 478-504. doi:10.1080/00220973.2010.512318

Waller, R. (2006). 'I don't feel like "a student", I feel like "me"!: the over simplification of mature learners' experience(s). *Research in post-compulsory education*, *11*(1), 115-130. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13596740500508019

Walters, M. (2000). The mature students' three Rs. *British journal of guidance & counselling*, *8*(2), 268-278. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069880050013548

Watson, D., McCoy, S., Gorby, S. (2006). *The post-leaving certificate sector in Ireland: A multivariate analysis of educational and employment outcomes*, Dublin: ESRI and Department of Education and Science.

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2011). I feel like I'm being hit from all directions: Enduring the bombardment as a mature-age learner returning to formal learning. *Australian journal of adult learning*, *51*(1), 120-142. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

# Appendices

Appendix 1

Pilot Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a research project on first-term experiences for mature students in further Education. Thank you for agreeing to take part.

1. Age _____

2. Male _____ Female _____ (please tick)

3. Nationality _____

4. Marital status (please tick) Single ___ Widowed ___ Married ___ Separated ___ Divorced ___

5. Do you have children? Yes___ No___ Please indicate the number of children and their ages: Age Number of children Under 5 years old _____ Between 5 and 10 years _____ Between 11 and 15 years _____ Between 16 and 20 years _____ 21 years or older _____

6. At what age did you leave secondary school? _____

7. What is your highest educational achievement to date?

_____

8. Are you doing a one or two year course in further education? Please tick
One year_____ Two year_____

9. If you are doing a two year course, please indicate what year you are now in. First year____ Second year___

10. Please indicate how you support yourself financially while at college (e.g. part-time job, parental support, spousal support, VTOS etc.)

_____
_____

11. Why did you come back to education?

_____
_____
_____
_____

12. Did you find the induction useful in the beginning?

_____
_____
_____
_____

13. How did you find the first week in college?

_____
_____
_____
_____

14. Can you remember what you enjoyed the most about the first term (up until October mid-term break)

_____
_____
_____
_____

15. Can you remember the least enjoyable aspects of the first term?

_____
_____
_____
_____

16. Did you feel supported as a mature student by teaching staff during the first term in college?

_____
_____
_____
_____

17. Did you feel there were any obvious challenges that you faced in the first term?

_____
_____
_____
_____

18. Did you feel welcome by your peers during the first term?

_____
_____
_____
_____

19. How did you find learning alongside your younger peers during the first term?

_____
_____
_____
_____

20. Did you feel supported in using the Information Communication technologies in the first term? (e-mail/moodle/other)

_____
_____
_____
_____

21. Were you familiar with IT prior to coming to this college?

_____
_____
_____
_____

22. Do you have any future recommendations for supporting mature students during their first term in college?

_____
_____
_____
_____

23. Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. This researcher will also be recruiting mature students aged 28 years and older who would be willing to take part in an interview which will focus on experiences during the first term. Would you be willing to take part in an interview? Please tick.

Yes_____ No_____ If 'yes' please give a contact number or email address.

_____/_____

Thank you

Appendix 2

**Interview Questions Guide**

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?

2. What brought you to education?

3. Can you remember your first week in college?

4. Do you remember being at the class induction?

5. Can you remember your first class?

6. Do you remember doing your first assessment?

7. Did you engage with I.T services in the beginning, such as moodle or onedrive?

7. Was there any key moment that stood out for you in the beginning?

8. How did/do you feel about studying with younger peers?

8. Do you feel your perspective has changed since the beginning?

9. Is there anything that I have failed to ask you that you think might be important to note?

10. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 3

**Research Project on Mature Students Experiences in Further Education**

I am looking to explore the experiences during the first term for mature students in Further Education.

The aim of this study is to find out how mature students found the initial transition to Further Education.

This research will contribute towards my thesis for a Masters in Learning and Teaching in the National College of Ireland, Dublin.

I am looking for interview candidates aged 28 years and older who would be willing to discuss the transitional experience into Further Education. For this reason, I am looking for adults who are in the first year of a course here in the college.

The interview will last approximately 30- 45 minutes. All interviews will be recorded and subsequently transcribed.

If you decide to participate, you are still free to change your mind and withdraw from the research at any time, before, during and even afterwards.

You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to.

All information included in the research will remain anonymous. I will not be using your real name in my thesis.

If you need to speak to somebody during or after the study or if you have any concerns or questions regarding this study please feel free to contact me at any stage.

Thanks in advance,

Alison Delahunt

Appendix 4

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**National College of Ireland, Dublin.**

**Title of study:** Setting the foundations: Transitional experiences for mature learners in an Irish Further Education setting

**Investigator**

**Name:** Alison Delahunt **Phone:** [Removed]

## Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study of mature learners who have come to study on a one year full-time QQI level 5 or level 6 course.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are a mature learner who is over the age of 28 years and you are engaged in either a one-year full-time course or are in your first year of a course.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

## Purpose of Study

- The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of mature learners in an Further Education setting and to identify any important factors that influence the mature learner transition to college.
- Ultimately, this research may be presented as part of a masters thesis and may be published as part of a paper.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:
  1.Take part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher (which will last approximately 40 minutes)
  2. Try to answer the research questions to the best of your ability.
  3. Be willing to have the interview recorded (audio)

**Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks involved in taking part in the study.
  You have a right to withdraw from this study at any stage if you feel uncomfortable/ at risk.

## Confidentiality

- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be

kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Only the investigator named will have access to the audio recordings and they will only be used for educational purposes. After use, they will be deleted from the recording device and folder they are stored in. I will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study or Smith College. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Alison Delahunt at ADelahunt.dfe@lmetb.ie or by telephone at 087-4138606.

- If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can report them to the ethics committee at National College of Ireland.

**Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep by the study investigator.

Participants Name: _____
(print)

Participants Signature:_____ Date: _____

Investigators Name: _____

Investigators Signature:_____ Date: _____

Appendix 5

This appendix contains a selection from one of the transcripts from this study. Names as well as any other potential identifiers have been removed. Further transcripts are available upon request.

**Transcript from interview 1**

**Interviewer: Alison Delahunt**

**23/2/16: 12:00pm**

**Interviewer: D**

**Interviewee: [Name Removed using M]**

***D:*** This is interview number one on the 22nd February 2016 with [NAME REMOVED]

***M*:** [NAME REMOVED]

***D***: Okay thanks [NAME REMOVED], eh thanks very much for taking part in this interview

***M***: No problem

***D:*** Eh, [NAME REMOVED] can you just tell me a bit about yourself and I suppose your background or what has lead you here?

***M***:Ye hem, I worked, I went from college the first time to working in restaurants and then I ended up in the bank, in first active, I was there for about ten years and I did em kinda, exams for the financial eh, advisor, been able to give the advice to customers and then from there I took redundancy cos it was taken over by another bank, and I went on then to work in a solicitors for four years and then decided that I just didn't like office work it wasn't for [laughs] so I had an epiphany, and then I went on to come here, essentially, I left that job and I came here, so.

***D***: Right, so eh was that, how many years was that accounting for then?

***M***: Em…well I've went to college for the first time in about 97-98 so its about 20 years [laughs] I suppose, a 20 year span,
***D***: So did you go to college after leaving school or did you?

***M***: Yeh I did my leaving cert in ninety-seven and I went from there to do computerised design in college

***D:*** Oh okay

***M:*** Eh that was a 3 year course, and then it was very difficult to get a job in that area, it was all very much kinda we need em 3 years experience or at least 2 years experience which was really hard to get, so I em, worked in restaurants for a while at that stage, and then I ended up in the bank, so, to try and get a proper job as they say, [laughs]

***D***: Yeh, pensionable job

***M***: Yeh [laughs] and so..

***D***; Eh, so then you did that, so were you in the workforce right before coming here?

***M***: Em, pretty much, yeh, em I left, I left work around this time last year actually, em cos I was doing voluntary work as well so I thought it would help my chances of getting in to do a course like this if I had some sort of hands on sort of experience behind me as well so, it was, I was lucky enough that I had support from my husband as well I wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise, but eh, but yeh so that's,

***D***: Umm… so that's ultimately would that be the reason you've come to education here?

***M;*** Em yeh. Pretty much. Em, it was when I was volunteering it just kind of got me to realise that you know I wasn't happy working the office jobs and I just wanted to do something with about more sort of, with a bit more sort of satis.., a bit more kind of job satisfication to kind of get a bit more out of it, so em.

***D***: And your volunteering was with [NAME REMOVED] was it?

***M***: I did volunteering with [NAME REMOVED] and [NAME REMOVED] and [NAME REMOVED] a few times as well so em, the more I did the more I just knew em I wanted to do it so I just said ill bite the bullet and go back so, (laughs)

***D***: And you've had the support of your?

***M***: Yeh my husband, like it was him like, I was always sort of saying I would love to go back to college and it was him, and I was kind of thinking I'll do it a night or maybe part-time and then I can still work and still have an income but em it was him that kind of encouraged me…he was saying look "just do it full-time cos if your gonna do it you may as well do it right and it'll be quicker that way as well" ,to get back to the workforce, so, that was it.

***D***:Yeh, and eh that's good, it sounds like the volunteer work was really the defining moment there was it

***M***: It was yeh, I knew I wanted to, I knew what I didn't want to do but I wasn't a 100% sure what I wanted to do but that really did help and you and in making my mind up and making the final decision

***D:*** And what led you to volunteer in the first place?

***G***:em, it was just, I just wanted a hobby to be honest, I wanted something to do, I've always loved the [NAME REMOVED] and I've always just loved been around [NAME REMOVED], so it was sort of, again it was something I always said I, I always wanted to be [NAME REMOVED] when I was a kid, do you know that kind of way, and when you get a bit older and you sort of end up forgetting about what you wanted to do when you were a kid [laughs] and you go down different routes, you know but, em I did, it was always an interest and I always like it so em, I decided to go back and do it now so.

*End of Sample*