

*An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Exploring
Perceptions of a Change in Assessment Method due to
the impact of COVID-19.*

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Master of Arts in Educational Practice
2021
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Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland
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(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

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Title of Thesis: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Exploring the Key Stakeholders' Perceptions of a change in Terminal Assessment Method for the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme, in Ireland, due to the impact of COVID-19.

Date: 2nd August 2021

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Acknowledgement.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the source of my inspiration, Joe and Dolie, for being wonderful parents, for their constant support, unwavering love and belief in me, who encouraged me to overcome self-doubts and return to education in later life, it has been a life changing experience.

There are a few people who deserve a special mention because of their significant contribution to this academic inquiry. First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Leo Casey, who provided guidance, patience and understanding from the start to the completion of this dissertation. I would also like to thank my lecturers whose contribution is appreciated in actualising this research and the participants of the NCCAP who took part in the research. I would like to extend a sincere and grateful thanks to my peers, your friendship and support as we journeyed together got me there.

Furthermore, there are those who make the journey of life pleasurable and reassuring. To this end, I would like to thank my friend and mentor Chef Ben, my siblings for their relentless support and love and I would like to say a big thank you to all my friends, too many to mention, who supported me throughout this extraordinary experience.

Abstract

This research is an interpretative phenomenological study exploring the key stakeholders' perceptions of a change in terminal assessment method for the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme, in Ireland, due to the impact of COVID-19. The aim of this research was to increase knowledge, awareness and understanding of the participant's unique perspectives to gain an insight into how a change in assessment method can be supported and strengthened to improve the outcomes for the stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants, three instructors and three learners, from Further Education and Training Centres throughout Ireland. The participants were selected purposefully to ensure they were best placed to reflect upon a range of appropriate and meaningful experiences of the phenomenon. Thematic Analysis was adopted as the methodological approach and four significant themes emerged from the analysis. The participants emphasised the importance of the combined voice of instructors and learners in the decision-making process on a change in assessment methods, increased anxiety brought about by this change, the skill set required to complete a changed assessment method and the factors influencing engagement with a changed assessment method. The research findings show that the change in assessment method for the NCCAP was negatively perceived by the participants and considered a missed opportunity. This research concludes that the change in assessment method was flawed. The study recommends further research into the process of change in assessment, gender balance in research, and learners and instructors as partners in education. The results of this lived experience study may serve multiple stakeholders, such as culinary educational professionals, professional organizations, FET centres, colleges/universities, and the wider educational community, as they face the challenge of a change in assessment method due to a pandemic.

Keywords Commis Chef, perception, change in assessment, COVID-19

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

COVID-19	Novel Coronavirus
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Board Ireland
FET	Further Education and Education
HE	Higher Education.
IT	Information Technology
KETB	Kerry Education and Training Board
NCCAP	National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SOLAS	Seribhis Oideachas Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna
TA	Thematic Analysis
THE	Take Home Exam.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter explores what this research study is about, why this research area has been selected and the ambitions of the hoped achievement of the study.

This research study is situated within Further Education and Training (FET) delivered through education and training centres across Ireland and includes the design and implementation of a change in assessment method for the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme (NCCAP) due to the impact of a pandemic, Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). It seeks to explore the lived experiences of the key stakeholders of the programme, the instructors and the learners, who have engaged with the changed assessment method developed as a direct result of the impact COVID-19. Given (2008) defines the lived experience as a depiction of research participants' experiences, the options and choices they make, and how these experiences can influence their perceptions of knowledge. This study holds personal and professional interest for me as both a researcher, as I am currently a student completing a master's degree, as well as my role as an instructor for the NCCAP. The research topic was chosen through my professional interest in the experience of this change in assessment method and the current ongoing debates and emerging research gaps in a change in assessment methods brought about by a pandemic. It is the ambition that this study will provide examples and produce knowledge on the impact that the changed assessment method had on the NCCAP and could also potentially contribute to broader knowledge of the development and successful migration to a change in assessment methods within FET.

In the world of adult education, the terms teacher and instructor, student and learner are interchangeable. While some will argue the subtle differences in these terms, for the purpose of the study, the stakeholders are the learners engaging with the NCCAP through

FET, and the instructors are those who deliver the programme and most importantly designed and graded the alternative assessment methods implemented in response to COVID-19.

1.2 Background to the Research

The NCCAP is a two-year new apprenticeship programme that combines training off the job, through training centres, and training on the job through the workplace. The programme is fully funded through Seirbhísi Oideachais Leanúnaigh Agus Scileanna (SOLAS), the designated intermediary body for the European Social Fund Programme for Employment, Inclusion and Learning. The NCCAP is delivered through a consortium of Educational and Training Boards (ETBs) throughout Ireland with Kerry Educational and Training Board (KETB) appointed as the co-ordinating provider. At the time of this research there were eleven programmes operational throughout the country, delivered by fifteen instructors with eighty-six learners engaging in their first formal qualification. A variety of assessment methods are applied throughout the programme, one of which is the terminal traditional pen and paper invigilated theoretical exam at the end of each module.

As we watched in fascination the early images from Wuhan in China of the impact of COVID-19 on society, it was with an increasing level of dismay and unease that we witnessed the virus spread rapidly across the world. There was a growing sense of unease, and those of us working in FET wondered what the impact its impending arrival in Ireland might be. I was particularly concerned as I was in the final stages of delivery of one of the inaugural programmes. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about the largest disruption of the education system ever witnessed, affecting an estimated 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The Irish Government moved swiftly and in March 2020 issued instructions that saw apprentices severely impacted when social distancing measures were put in place. The implementation of a national lockdown by demanded that all FET centres across the country and hospitality businesses close immediately. The

intervention resulted in apprentices prevented from attending either training centres or places of work, two critical elements of their apprenticeship. FET responded swiftly, making determined efforts to keep up with training centre based theoretical learning through distance learning platforms. This was a determined effort to keep programmes on track. However, there remained the question of how to deal with assessment. As co-ordinating provider, KETB established a rapid response committee, comprised of all the instructors of the NCCAP and through urgent collaboration the pen and paper invigilated exam redesigned to an open book Take Home Exam (THE). The changed assessment method was developed to replace the traditional pen and paper, invigilated, one hour and thirty-minute theory exam. The timeframe for this changed assessment method increased from the established one and a half hours closed book exam to a two-week completion for an open book THE. The redesign was broadly completed in alignment with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) guidelines to alternative assessment during the pandemic.

As soon as lockdown was eased and with the reopening of the FET training centres, under instruction from KETB the programme immediately reverted to the traditional pen and paper exam and the changed assessment method was set aside.

1.3 Rationale and Significance of the Research

The original starting point for this study evolved from my professional position as an instructor of the NCCAP and wanting to understand the perceptions of the key stakeholders of the programme to the changed assessment method brought about by the pandemic. My interest in the lived experience of the stakeholders for the programme was to understand not only the experience of the changed assessment method but also the implications of this change on professional practice and the insights that can be learned through this experience.

There exists a significant body of research into a change in assessment method in the educational context brought about for a variety of reasons, but little research exists to a

change brought about by a pandemic. Since the globalisation of the pandemic in early 2020, there are several researchers now sharing their research into the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning. According to the United Nations (2020), the approach to assessment under the shadow of COVID-19 shows a lot of trial and error, uncertainty and confusions among both teachers and students. However, research by QQI (2020) presents a distinct perspective suggesting overwhelming acceptance of a change in assessment method by all stakeholders. Research by Burke and Dempsey (2020) offer an alternative view to QQI's findings, and I am interested to explore which perspective the lived experience of the stakeholders of the NCCAP aligns with. This was a starting point for me as a researcher and the review of literature expanded beyond this to include literature on assessment, the factors that influence stakeholder perception, and perception of change in assessment methods. There is a gap in knowledge identified as there exists little educational research that combines the voices of teachers and students and specifically on the impact of a pandemic on assessment practices. Sohn et al. (2017) highlights the significant contribution that the combined voices of instructors and learners can make in a phenomenological approach to educational research.

Finally, this research is significant as other researchers have recommended that further research on the impact of the pandemic on education communities should be undertaken (Burke & Dempsey, 2020). This recommendation is also endorsed by QQI who suggest that a detailed review must be undertaken to assess any change in assessment methods brought about by the pandemic.

1.4 Positionality and Methodology

This is a Phenomenological qualitative study as it is research into a lived experience. According to Burch (1990), the very heart of phenomenology is the intelligibility of lived experience.

I was an instructor delivering the NCCAP from 2018 to 2021. I lived through the disruption that the pandemic brought to the programme and particularly to module terminal assessment methods. My role as an instructor and co-designer of the changed assessment pieces provides excellent insight into the stakeholder's perceptions of this change in assessment method due to COVID-19.

Along with my colleagues, I was involved in the decision-making process to migrate to a changed assessment method and re-designed a number of the THEs. I was closely involved in the process, the design and the grading of this changed summative assessment. I am therefore an insider researcher, "viewed as the holy grail for the qualitative researcher" (Gana & Scott, 2006, p. 7) and argued by Dwyer and Buckley (2009) to bring a degree of openness and trust that may not be otherwise achieved.

Critics of insider research debate the objectivity of such study, and Simmel (1950) argues that prejudice may compromise truth. Hewitt-Taylor (2002) also discusses the risk of bias within insider research, and it is argued that such discrimination can compromise the data analysis process (Schultz, 1971).

Careful consideration was given to the risks of insider research, and while accepting that such risks cannot be eliminated, steps were taken to minimise the potential risks. van Manen (2003) argues that before asking others to provide a personal description of a phenomenon being explored, we should first try to do this ourselves as a researcher. The benefit of this personal declaration brings a positive influence on what this research is setting out to achieve. It represents one of the tools that can assist in uncovering the hidden meaning within the experience of the stakeholders. Additionally, this in-depth personal experience can help in the research and assist in the understanding of certain notions that otherwise could be easily overlooked.

This research is an interpretive phenomenological study using qualitative methods. The methodology was guided by Chapter Two, the Literature Review, and involved the collection and analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews of the key stakeholders of the NCCAP to a change in assessment methods.

1.5 Purpose of Research

This is a qualitative phenomenological study the purpose of which was to examine the lived experience of the key stakeholders to a change in assessment methods brought about by the pandemic. The study included instructors and learners engaged with the NCCAP throughout Ireland. This study adopted an interpretivist approach using semi-structured interviews with the stakeholders of the programme. Interviewing those directly involved in the NCCAP provides insight into the phenomenon of the change in assessment methods.

1.5.1 Research Aims

The aim of this study is to understand the key stakeholders' perceptions of the change in assessment methods for the NCCAP due to the impact of COVID-19.

1.5.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine the lived experience of instructors and learners engaged with the N.C.C.A.P to a change in assessment methods brought about by the pandemic.
- To add to existing knowledge and understanding to assist researchers and educational professionals in their future attempts to understand stakeholders' perceptions to a change in assessment method due to the impact of a pandemic.
- To assess any implications of the perceptions of stakeholders of the NCCAP to a change in assessment method for policy, practice and research.

It is also hoped that this research will contribute to the current conversation on the impact of COVID-19 on assessment practices.

1.6 Structure of this Dissertation

This section will provide an outline for this dissertation which is organised and into the following linked chapters.

This introduction is followed by Chapter Two – the Literature Review. This will provide an overview of previously published literature on the research area, including debates and arguments on the main themes of the research area. This review will provide both myself as a researcher, and the reader, with an overview of the existing knowledge on this research area. The review will include literature that is deeply rooted in the themes of the research area, context and background, assessment, perception, theoretical perspectives of perception and perception of changes in assessment methods. The literature review will assist in the development of the research question and guide the approach to methodology.

Chapter three – Methodology, follows the Literature Review. This chapter explains what I did throughout the research process, how I conducted the research itself, and provides justification for the decisions that I made through every step of the process. This chapter discloses my position as a researcher and the research paradigm, the lens through which the research was conducted. This will be followed by a comprehensive description of the research strategy and design, data collection and analysis, and the steps taken to ensure rigour throughout the research process. Finally, the ethical considerations are presented and an acknowledgement of any limitations to this research.

The aim of Chapter Four, Findings and Discussion is to discuss both these aspects of the lived experience of the key stakeholders of the NCCAP to the change in assessment methods brought about by the pandemic. This section will summarise the findings under the significant themes that emerged through the data analysis that address the research question and discuss these findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

Finally, Chapter Five Conclusions, will present the overall conclusion and contribution that this research makes to the research area and suggest the implications and recommendation for the future research and educational practice. This section will bring the whole dissertation to a close and include a personal reflection on my journey as a researcher.

1.7 Summary

The arrival of COVID-19 to Ireland presented significant challenges to FET and particularly for assessment methods for the NCCAP. This research seeks to understand the lived experience of the stakeholders of the NCCAP of a change in assessment method brought about by the global pandemic, COVID-19. The research provides the opportunity for the stakeholders of the NCCAP to share their experiences of a change in assessment methods from the traditional pen and paper invigilated exam to a two week THE. As this is research into the lived experience it is a qualitative phenomenological study. This chapter provides the structure of the dissertation, the background to the research area and the rational and significance of this study. My positionality as a researcher is declared and a brief glimpse of the methodology is provided. This chapter also provides the purpose of the research and the aims and objectives of the study are clearly stated. on.

The results of this lived experience study may serve multiple stakeholders, such as educational professionals, professional organizations, FET centres, colleges, universities, and the wider educational community. Following on from this introduction the comprehensive literature review is presented in Chapter Two.

Chapter 2: The Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study was prompted out of an interest to understand the lived experience of key stakeholders of the NCCAP of a change in assessment methods brought about by the pandemic. Baumeister and Leary (1997) describe a literature review as a methodical process of collecting and synthesizing previous research and contributes across all areas of the research process. A review of appropriate literature provides an understanding of the existing research and debates relevant to a specific area of study. A comprehensive literature review will “bring clarity and focus to the research problem, improve the research methodology, broaden the knowledge base in the research area and contextualise the findings” (Kumar, 2014, p. 32). This review is divided into five sections and will migrate from the general to the specific within the research area.

Section one provides an understanding of the context to the research area. Section two will investigate the purpose and importance of assessment and the third section explores the stakeholder’s, the instructor’s and learner’s, perceptions of assessment. The fourth section will examine the perceptions of the stakeholders to a change in assessment methods. While space is limited section five will discuss any relevant unexpected themes that emerge during the review itself. Section six will present the approach to critical analysis of the literature reviewed that underpins the rationale for the research area. Finally, the last section provides a summary of the most salient points and a presentation of the research question that was guided by the literature review.

2.2 Context of the Research Area.

This section provides the context to the research area and information on COVID-19, FET and adult learners, apprenticeships, and key stakeholders of the NCCAP.

2.2.1 COVID-19

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes COVID-19 as an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Coronavirus which is life threatening. WHO advise that the most effective way to prevent the spread of the virus is to avoid contact with other people and to exercise social distancing. Compliance with this advice caused serious disruption to FET who were forced to close training centers to comply with Irish Government guidelines and emerging legislation, designed to combat the virus and save lives.

2.2.2 FET and Adult Learners

On the 1st of July 2013, under the Education and Training Act 2013, FET was established in Ireland. It consists of sixteen ETBs, coordinated through Educational and Training Board Ireland (ETBI, responsible for the delivery of education and training.

FET provision in Ireland is varied and wide ranging in nature and as such is difficult to define. The organisation provides a second chance for individuals to access education and training, vocational, or professional development for those already in the workforce or for those seeking retraining to re-join the workforce, community education and training, and provides initial vocational education and training, including apprenticeships (SOLAS, 2014).

There are many terms associated with the adult learner population in education and training and these learners are defined as non-traditional students, lifelong learners, re-entry students, mature learners, or second-chance students, and according to Gust (2006) adult learner. Recent research highlights the term “Adult Learner” as the term most used, and is acknowledged as an accurate and descriptive name for this cohort of learners (Donavant et al., 2013; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Marschall & Davis, 2012).

2.2.3 New Apprenticeships and the NCCAP

The idea of apprenticeships is not new and is considered to be an ancient form of knowledge transfer in the western world. The origins of apprenticeship can be traced to

historical archives in medieval Europe where young workers, starting out in their professional career, trained alongside the experts in a craft for several years. This tradition of knowledge and skill transfer created a system where one generation passed on its knowledge to the next, benefiting both parties and broader society (Wyman, 2014).

Apprenticeship are a structured education and training programme which formally combine workplace learning, known as on-the-job training, and learning and training in an education or training centre, known as off-the-job training (HEA, 2021). The purpose of apprenticeship programmes is to prepare apprentices for a specific occupation and leads to a qualification that is nationally recognised on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) from Level 5 to Level 10. There is significant investment by the Irish Government into apprenticeships, estimated at €198m for 2021, and this has expanded from twenty-five national apprenticeships in craft-based areas to fifty-nine programmes currently in progress across a wide range of twenty-first century industries. There are currently estimated to be in excess of 20,000 people currently completing an apprenticeship, with 7,000 employers throughout Ireland. (Interview SOLAS, 2021).

In response to industry demands, a review of apprenticeship training in Ireland was announced by the Minister for Education and Skills in 2013, resulting in the formation of the Apprenticeship Council of Ireland and from this, the National Apprenticeship System was established. A “Call for Proposals” for apprenticeships in newly identified occupations was issued in 2015 that prepared the way for a new raft of apprenticeships in areas of industry previously never conceived of. From 2016 all new apprenticeships developed in Ireland follow the new apprenticeship approach and significantly changed from the old apprenticeship structure as they are to be:

- Industry led
- Two years duration as a minimum

- Involve learning that alternates between a workplace and an educational or training institute
- Involve a minimum of 50% on the job training
- Part of formal Education and Training
- Substantial in depth and duration, to prepare apprentices to work autonomously and competently in a specific occupation
- That apprentices are employed and paid under a Contract of Apprenticeship
- That apprentices paid a salary for the duration of the apprenticeship (on-the-job and off-the-job).

Answering the “Call for Proposals,” KETB in conjunction with key players in the Hospitality Industry designed the NCCAP. KETB applied to QQI for validation of the NCCAP on 8 May 2017 (revised 1st June 2017), and validation was granted.

The programme is a national programme coordinated by KETB and will lead to a QQI Advanced Certificate (NFQ Level 6). My employer was just one of several ETBs that collaborate with KETB in the provision of this programme. This programme is unique in several respects as KETB described this new apprenticeship as:

“It is a new apprenticeship backed by an industry led Consortium Steering Group. It is the first apprenticeship programme with an Education and Training Board in the role of Coordinating Provider. It is the first programme to use a new template for Quality Assurance Procedures for National Apprenticeship Programmes and procedures developed with the support of ETBI (Education and Training Boards Ireland). It is also, incidentally, the first programme submitted for validation by an ETB under QQI’s 2016 validation policies and criteria”.
(KETB, 2017, p. 24)

2.2.4 Key Stakeholders for the NCCAP.

Zhang and Zhang (2008) suggest that there are a wide range of stakeholders in education, two of which are instructors and learners. Durham et al., (2014) define stakeholders as “any person or group who influences or is influenced by the research”. The researchers add further clarification by adding

“This broad, inclusive definition covers anyone, or any group, directly or indirectly affected by a project, as well as those who may have interests in a project and/ or the ability to influence its outcome, either positively or negatively. A stakeholder does not have to be a direct user of, or directly affected by, project outcomes to be influenced by them” (Durham et al., 2014, p. 12)

2.3 Assessment, Purpose, and Importance.

Assessment has been defined many ways, one of which is as the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, and using information about learner submissions to educational tasks (Lambert & Lyons, 2000). Gronuld (2006) suggests assessment as a variety of tasks by which instructors collect information regarding the performance and achievement of their cohort of learners. In 2002 Gipps offered a broader definition of assessment as a wide range of methods for evaluating student performance and attainments. Assessment can include formal testing and examinations, both practical and oral assessment, classroom assessment carried out by instructors and also portfolios of work. While academics may disagree on assessment methods, they all agree on the significance and importance of assessment in education. Gipps (2006) suggests that assessment is multifunctional, not only does it frame learning, and create learning activity but also influences all aspects of learning behaviour. Assessment has been defined as “the systematic collection and analysis of information to improve student learning.” (Stassen et al., 2001, p. 5). This definition encapsulates the essential function of learner assessment in the teaching and learning process.

Instructors perceive assessment as vital in pedagogical design and approach. The importance of assessment cannot be underestimated as it requires instructors to think like an assessor first before designing specific units and lessons. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) argue that such an approach enables instructors to consider in advance how they will determine if students have attained the desired understandings.

Assessment serves several purposes, two of which are student learning and certification. The process of certification encompasses the evaluation of student achievement (Carless, 2015). Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) suggest that assessment is categorised as either formative or summative, the categorisation depending on how the results are used

2.3.1 The Distinction between Formative and Summative Assessment

Harvey (1998) takes a satirical view of the distinction between formative and summative assessment, considered highly appropriate for the culinary context of this research, suggesting that when the chef tastes the soup it is formative assessment but when the dinner guest tastes the soup, it is summative assessment.

As the area for this research is focussed on summative assessment, and due to limitations of space for this dissertation, only a brief overview of formative assessment is provided.

Formative assessment has been described as a process in which feedback during instruction is provided by both instructors and learners (McManus, 2008). The purpose of feedback is to structure the learning and teaching process to ultimately increase student achievement. Saifi et al., (2011) suggest that throughout the teaching and learning process formative assessment occurs on a continuous basis. Formative assessment is defined as assessment for learning.

Summative assessments are considered high-stakes assessments and provide a final understanding of precisely how much learning has taken place, in other words how much

does a student actually know (Gardner, 2010). Grading is an integral part of summative assessments, such assessments are typically less frequent, usually occurring at the end of period of instruction, module, or semester. Both stakeholders in education, instructors and learners agree that summative assessment is considered to serve as a tool for reporting learners' progress and in addition to support learning (Brookhart, 2001; Black et al., 2010) Summative assessments offers learners not only the chance to demonstrate their conceptual understanding, but also provides them the opportunity to think critically. These become evident as they apply their understanding under controlled conditions to solve unfamiliar problems (National Research Council, 2001).

Summative assessment is intended to provide evidence of what learners know and understand at a given point in time. It has been argued that in summative assessment 'the concern is to judge achievement against broader indicators, such as module descriptors or grade level criteria' (Harlen, 2008, p. 139). In the educational setting Clarke (2012) argues that summative assessments are evaluated through a course grade and that summative assessment should be standard-reference using the same standards for all learners.

The following section focusses on providing an understanding of perception of assessment in the educational context.

2.4 Perception

Perception has been defined as the process by which sensations are organized into an inner representation of the world (Rathus, 2007). Perception is a unique individual experience where one can only draw from what is known to them (McDonald, 2011). McDonald reaches back to the ancient Hindu fable of six blind men who encounter an elephant on the road, an entity never experienced before. Each try to identify appropriate comparisons for this unknown entity from their own subjective experience. One by one they take turns through the sense of touch and each draws his own individual conclusions from the

limited area within reach and based on their individual experience each creates their own unique and subjective mental image of the newly encountered entity. A heated debate follows as each man is confident in his own perception of the entity and argue that it is like a wall, snake, spear, tree, fan, or rope. McDonald cites this fable to illustrate that to perceive anything there is a need to be exposed to something.

Perception is described as how an individual has cognitive contact with the world and perception is created a range of physical factors, the brain, sense organs, and the nervous systems. Perception is possible through the first-person experience. Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that the first person's experience cannot be accessed from a third person perspective.

2.4.1 Theories of Perception in Education

Perception is defined as our way to recognize and interpret information we have gathered through our senses, (Williams, 2018). Johnson (1994) argues that perceptions are central to both practice and research, and that understanding why a person thinks or acts in a specific way is problematic for learners and practitioners of education. Johnson suggests that fundamental to perception is that there is an experiencing person or perceiver, and that something is being perceived, be it an object, person, situation, or relationship.

The context of the situation in which objects, events or people are perceived is a contributing factor in perception and Lewis (1994) argues that the process nature of perception initiates with the experiencing of multiple stimuli by the senses and ending with the formation of perceptions. Later research by Lewis (1999) argues that definitions and theories lie within the fields of Philosophy and Psychology and contain their own theoretical debates. Attempting to understand the developmental process of perception and what takes place in the process itself, is complex. However, what becomes evident is that humans often differ in their interpretation of that which is perceived. It is through human experience that we construct our perceptions.

2.4.2 Phenomenology of Perception

According to Sokolowski (2000) phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us through experience. Smith (2008) argues phenomenology as the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The “father” or considered the greatest figure of phenomenology was the mathematician Edmund Husserl. While the publication of “Phenomenology of Perception” stands in the great phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty’s contribution is also significant in this field. Smith et al., (2009) noted that Merleau-Ponty concentrated much of his work on subjectivity and our relationship to the world. Research by Finlay (2007) suggests that at the core of the phenomenological philosophy is an established argument of the significant role of perception in understanding and engaging with the world.

All stakeholders, both instructors and learners, have perceptions about assessments and assessment practices. With an understanding of perception this next section discusses the factors that influences stakeholder perceptions of assessment

2.5 Influences on Student and Teacher Perceptions of Assessment

There exists a significant body of research on the influences on instructor and learner perceptions of assessment and suggests three key areas that influence these perceptions, subjective histories, relevance, and relationships.

Research has identified links between personal assessment histories and assessment perceptions. Many researchers agree on this point but there is a distinct lack of evidence within this research on how exactly this might occur. In reviewing this research evidence emerges of a polarisation of views (Biggs and Moore, 1993; Hughes, 1998; Schmeck, 1988). Endwhistle and Karagiannopoulou (2014) suggested two perspectives of how students perceive assessment, that it is either through student established histories or the learning context itself. Nisbett and Ross (1980) suggest that learner perceptions of assessment are

influenced by motivations such as fear. This fear is as a direct result from past painful experiences. The researchers further suggest that this fear may bring about a defence mechanism identified as assessment avoidance and attributes failure to assessment as irrelevance.

According to Stensaker (1999) more attention should be paid to perceptions of relevance in assessment design. Huff and Sireci (2001) conclude that assessments that make relevant connections with the world of work appear to deliver significantly greater positive influence on student learning.

The third influences on student and teacher perceptions of assessment is relationships, that is the relationship between the teacher and the student. A Positive student–teacher relationships can enhance cognitive learning outcomes and has been shown to determine whether both parties attain their goals (Bainbridge and Houser, 2000).

However, these studies have explored how teachers perceive their relationships with students but do not include the voice of students, the research reflects teachers' interpretations of students' perceptions and in-fact there and there exists little research on how such relationships might impact upon student perceptions of assessment through the direct inclusion of the student voice.

It is suggested that in addition to subjective histories, relevance and relationships, perceptions of assessment are also influenced by purpose, validity, reliability, authenticity and efficacy.

2.5.1 Perceptions of Purpose of Assessment

Boud (1990) argues that instructors perceive the purpose of assessment are to gather students' learning experiences and knowledge over a specific timeframe, that authenticates their personal and professional development. There is a strong perception among instructors that student learning is enriched through the successful alignment between curriculum

content and assessment tasks. In achieving alignment assessment moves far beyond just an exercise that is based on memorized learning.

From a student perspective, perceptions of assessment are reinforced by the value and purpose that they place on assessments. Denscombe (2000) argues that learners perceive the successful completion of learning outcomes as an opportunity to continue in higher or further education as well as to access jobs. Many researchers agree that learners' trust and attitudes towards the purposes of assessment can elevate the levels of engagement with assessments (Gal & Ginsburg, 1994; Vroom, 1964).

2.5.2 Perceptions of Validity of Assessment

Instructors perceive that without validity of purpose in assessment there is nothing to be gained. Research by Messick (1989) argues that validity is based on the appropriateness and adequacy of the interpretations made from assessments. Teachers perceive that the concept of validity of assessment applies to all assessments and the interpretive evidence redeemed from assessments. To put another way, instructors expect assessment to measure the learning outcomes, in essence what it is supposed to measure. However, it is suggested that some instructors may perceive the validity of assessment to be only about the content and not necessarily whether it assesses correctly. Messick (1989) suggests that a perceived difficulty with assessment practices stems from past experiences with the interpretation of marks. How well an individual scores is influenced by the context of the assessment and stimulus to the conditions of the assessment itself.

Students perceive that assessment involves judgements of their academic performance and how it meets established standards. Bould and Associates (2010) argue that validity of assessment contributes significantly to promoting student's learning through accreditation.

2.5.3 Perceptions of Reliability of Assessment

Reliability, in general, can be defined as the level of accuracy in measuring the progress a learner has made over a specific time period. “The reliability of assessment concerns the capacity of reliable content-specific evidence collected. Thus, the level of reliability is proportionate to the amount of evidence on which those conclusions are based” (Masters, 2013, p. 5).

Murphy (2004) argues that it is within the context of the reliability of the measurement process itself that the instructors’ perceptions of reliability can be interpreted. Many researchers agree that for an assessment tool to be considered reliable it should produce stable and consistent results (Henson, 2001). Koul and Fisher (2006) argue that learner academic attitudes can be influenced by the successful alignment between reliability and assessment. They further argue that this successful alignment also results in increased academic achievements. These findings further suggest that the real value of a learner’s academic achievement should reflect in the assessment of their work and conclude instructors’ perception of assessment reliability are consistent with students’ positive attitudes towards academic achievement.

Learners’ perceptions of the reliability of assessment of their work being judged significantly influences the success in their progression in learning. From the learner perspective results should, at all times irrespective of when the assessment is completed, be trustworthy, stable, and consistent. According to Newton (2005) learners trust instructors to assess their work impartially. Instructors are perceived by their learners as professional and well-trained subject matter experts. Newton (2005) further concluded that it is highly unusual for learners to question reliability of the assessment process, or their awarded academic results. Students display significant trust in the system to deliver the right outcomes.

2.5.4 Perceptions of Authenticity of Assessment

Authenticity in assessment is defined as the measurement of what is real, and that the assessment should reflect such realism in the real world. Authenticity is further defined as “Generally, teachers believe authenticity of assessment should align with the curriculum’s intended outcomes in order to enhance meaningful judgement of students’ performances” (Linn et al., 1991, p. 11)

Learners believe that the authenticity of their assessment tasks should be reflected in the grading of their work. Assessment tasks should reflect and develop the skills that are required to contribute effectively to the real world (Boud, 1995; Messick, 1994). Their perceptions of authenticity in assessment includes contextualised tasks and the judgmental marking of assessment submissions. The value of completing an assessment is deeply rooted in the learners’ perceptions of authenticity of assessments. However, Gulikers et al. (2008) argue that a gap exists between the instructor and learner perceptions of authenticity. This research suggests that there is a divergence in perception of authenticity, assessment tasks instructors considered were authentic were not considered to be authentic by the learners.

For authentic assessment tasks to relate to real life it is critical that the tasks are realistic and in developing assessment pieces attention should be given to how learners respond to real-life situations. Although assessment methods can provide valid information about kinds of learning, Masters (2013) argues that validity is constructed through authenticity and the assessment piece is therefore fit for purpose. This view is supported by Gielen et al. (2003), who suggest that there are two important reasons for authentic, competency-based assessments, firstly their construct validity and secondly their impact on student learning, Gielen et al. (2003) further argues that competency assessment must appropriately reflect the competency that is being assessed and that the key to achieving this is through assessment involving authentic tasks representing real-life situations.

2.5.5 Perceptions of the Efficacy of Assessment

Efficacy is defined as the “capacity to produce a desired affect through the assessment process, that is, the selection of participants, choice of tasks or instruments and then judgement and data analysis methods” (Bandura & Locke, 2003, p. 87). Dochy et al. (2014) suggest that instructor and learner perceptions of efficacy are influenced by the perceived value of the assessment task. Learners’ attitudes and perceptions towards the efficacy of an assessment are deeply influenced by the value they place on the task, the more valuable the tasks are perceived then the greater likelihood that learners will enjoy the tasks. A further aspect of this is that the tasks learners perceive as more valuable then the more readily they will engage with elevated enthusiasm and passion, far above the tasks that are not valued. Efficacy of assessment are related to assessment practices and how prepared learners are for the task and the increases the likelihood of success. In such circumstances, learners are more likely to perceive the importance, utility, and value of the assessment, and according to Wigfield and Eccles (2000) are more likely to avoid tasks they believe are beyond their capabilities, those they believe they are not well prepared for. There are implications for learning and as Masters (2014) argues, where learning is more pleasurable, learners show increased engagement. Where learners are given tasks on which they are more likely to succeed they display elevated levels of self-confidence. Research suggests that self-efficacy is activated through the beliefs about the importance utility and value of the tasks. Therefore, task value and self-efficacy are both key components for understanding students’ choice of assessment tasks in classroom (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Research suggests that instructor perceptions of the efficacy of assessment may be influenced by perceived importance of the task (Sadler, 2010) and argues that a critical element of these practices is the feedback to learners on summative performance. However, this may be problematic as according to Higgins et al. (2002) a considerable number of

learners do not learn from feedback and suggests that this is due to the fact that their time for reinforcement may have expired. Berman et al. (1997) suggest that instructors believe that value of assessment assists all students to learn, including those that are unmotivated or have behavioural difficulties. However, the nature of educational change, and student achievement, influence perceptions of the efficacy of assessment (Petitt, 2011). It is suggesting that the identification and measurement of student achievement is highly contextual, depending to a considerable extent on the perceived importance such data have for improving student learning via the feedback (Masters, 2013)

2.5.6 Perceptions of Traditional Assessment Methods

A comprehensive review of the work of Struyven et al. (2005) of learners' perceptions of traditional assessment methods suggests that learners perceive traditional assessments damaging to learning as unfair. The researchers suggest that learners base this perceived damage in the belief that it encourages them to engage with the subject at a very procedural level. This research expands on previous research by Sambell et al. (1997) which suggested that the student perceive traditional assessment tasks as arbitrary and irrelevant. A review of appropriate literature suggests that students prefer to be assessed by innovative methods and define innovative methods as any methods other than the traditional pen and paper, closed book invigilated examination. Traub and MacRury (1990) conclude that students prefer assessment methods that allow them to score marks easier and define innovative assessment as any method other than the traditional pen and paper timed closed book, invigilated exam. This non-traditional approach is perceived to have authentic value and which learners believe will prepare them for entering the real world.

2.6 Guidelines for Change in Assessment Methods due to COVID-19

In March 2020, QQI, published "The Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessment (Devised in response to the COVID-19 emergency restrictions)" in response to the dramatic

impact of the pandemic on assessment methods in FET. QQI noted in this document the need for responsiveness and flexibility in accommodating the abruptly changed environment caused by the spread of the coronavirus disease COVID-19 and suggest an approach to developing changed assessments to replace the established methodologies that could not be conducted under the Irish Government lockdown.

The overarching guidance to providers for the designing of a change in assessment methodologies to traditional examinations, was that such changes in assessment should appropriately assess programmes, stages or module learning outcomes and that the established core learning outcomes cannot, under any circumstances, be compromised. The guidelines further suggested that the focus should not be on the form of assessment used, ensuring that it can validly and reliably determine that learning outcomes have been achieved. The newly designed assessment pieces should further seek the views and feedback of peers in the academic community as a means of ensuring good practice and securing due recognition. Equal importance should be given to ensure that any changes to assessments protected the academic integrity of the qualification-awarding processes and ensuring that students were not disadvantaged by the changed modes of assessment. The arrangements put in place should reflect the significance and weighting of the assessment to the programme type and stage. It is suggested further that assessment and deferral of award activities should be avoided due to the unforeseen duration of the existing restrictions and should be concluded as soon as possible. Consideration should be given to the potential for increased incidence of illness among student and staff populations over the coming period. Teachers and learners should be given as much time as possible to prepare for and engage with new methods of delivery and assessment. Consideration should also be given to student needs and preference in determining changed assessment types and how the impact of Information Technology (IT) failures and illness on assessment will be dealt with. To ensure public confidence in awards

and in the national qualifications system is maintained a realistic and reliable alternative assessment methods should be adopted and by transparently communicating plans in this regard to learners and the public in a timely manner. Consultation with QQI and other relevant stakeholders was recommended as necessary, including professional and regulatory bodies, and notification be given when the alternative assessment arrangements have been agreed and published. Whilst these are exceptional circumstances, the amendments made to assessment at this time should be evaluated at a later stage to assist in the understanding of success, or not, and can lead to long term system learning and enhancement.

2.7 Change in Assessment Methods

Following the guidelines, QQI published “The Impact of COVID-19, Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education” (2020). This report presented the findings of a high-level preliminary analysis of experiences reported on a range of different formats within teaching, learning and assessment across a wide range of organisations including Universities, Institutes of Technology, ETBs, Private HE Institutions, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), AONTAS, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, and others. This report reflected the direct views of key stakeholders in the education process, teachers, and learners, and in relation to this research, assessment.

In the designing of assessments methods in response to the impact of COVID-19 teachers confirmed that, in-line with the guidelines, there was an element of peer review by colleagues or external authenticators to quality assure the standard of assessment. Teachers also suggested that many of the written assessments and open-book examinations worked well, and, in many cases, the alternative assessment was found to be a better assessment instrument than the original. There was an elevated level of confidence in the integrity of new assessment and teachers believed that they had navigated the challenges to assessment that

COVID-19 brought with confidence and the actions taken ensured the continued confidence of all stakeholders in the integrity of awards. Some teachers noted that they lacked experience in assessment design and would have welcomed more by way of training, guidance and examples.

Learner data suggest that most learners expressed confidence in their ability to complete their assessments. They also felt that the redesigned assessments were fair. Learners commented that many of the written assessments and open-book examinations worked well. A significant number of learners found the completion of THEs a less stressful experience than a traditional examination.

“Lessons learned: The experience of teachers in Ireland during the 2020 pandemic” (Burke & Dempsey 2020) is a comprehensive report on the experience of teaching in the pandemic based on a survey of over four hundred and four teachers throughout Ireland. This report is only from the teacher perspective, the voice of learners was not included in this report and highlighted increased stress levels amongst the teachers. The one area highlighted in this report that did not cause teachers stress was a lack of self-belief in having the necessary skills to do their jobs.

Jankowski (2020) noted in “Assessment During a Crisis: Responding to a Global Pandemic” that because of COVID-19 the higher education environment had undergone significantly change, changes in assessment related processes, practices, reporting, and assessment of student learning itself. This survey, administered by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment in the USA, was implemented with the ambition of capturing a snapshot of assessment-related changes made during Spring 2020. While this this report approaches the topic from a distinct perspective, unlike in Ireland, there was no guidance for stakeholders who had to adapt assessment methods, so they worked on their own initiatives.

This report examines a broader variety of issues of assessment-related changes and supports the findings of QQI's own research.

These reports are extremely important presenting initial studies of the impact of the pandemic on teaching, learning and assessment from different geographical locations across the world. Combined, they provide reliable source as they reflect the voices and experience of all the stakeholders, instructors and learners, of these changes brought about by the impact of COVID-19.

2.7.1 Perceptions of a Change in Assessment Method

There is evidence in current literature of some resistance to any change in assessment methods from both the instructor and learner perspectives.

According to Clarke (2007) the resistance from teachers could be explained by teachers concerns that the introduction of a changed method of assessment could threaten the established high for a subject in society. Often unknown situations cause a professional unease, a fear of change, an anxiety of chaos, or even a professional concern for maintaining established standards and values (Cuban, 1998; Kelchtermans, 2005; Waugh & Punch, 1987).

Struyven et al. (2008) concluded that learners perceive changes of assessment methods as unfamiliar and unknown. The researchers further suggest assessments that are unfamiliar and unknown, are unloved. However, they argue that as students become more familiar with changed assessment tools, that this growing familiarity changes students' preferences positively and that finally their perceptions of the appropriateness of the changed assessment method aligns with their own preferences.

2.8 Established Terminal Assessment Method for the NCCAP

Williams and Wong (2009) argue that the general definition of in-class, closed-book, invigilated, pen-and-paper exam as a traditional assessment method. The traditional pen and paper assessment method was the established terminal assessment method at the end of each

module for the NCCAP, prior to the arrival of COVID-19 in Ireland. These established assessment methods usually involve challenging time limits, one and a half hours, and imposes stress on the students to perform in a controlled assessment environment. Research by Williams and Wong (2009) suggest that support for this assessment among instructors is based on the belief that this assessment method reduces, to a low and acceptable level, the risks of the exam being compromised by unethical student behaviour. However, the voice of critics of this assessment method is loud and many agree that this method deludes students to superficial learning (Williams & Wong 2009). Other research by Lopez et al. (2011) concluded that it does not promote students' generic skills. A significant body of researchers join Williams and Wong (2009) argue that the traditional pen and paper assessment method is not in alignment with the dominant theory of 'constructive alignment' in higher education (Biggs, 1999; Gianmarco, 2011).

2.8.1 Change in Terminal Assessment Method for the NCCAP.

An extensive variety of changed exam methods exist when the established assessment method cannot be completed in the usual way, one of which is the THEs. It was accepted by all the instructors as the preferred method to the traditional pen and paper exam for the NCCAP. The scheduled face to face in class exams would now take the form of THEs. These exams can be completed by students outside of the classroom, at a time and location of their choosing with access to subject notes, texts, and other resources. The time for submission was set at two weeks from deployment. THEs are none the less time-bound as but remain under the umbrella of time-constrained assessments. However, instead of writing during a set time of one and a half hours, students have an extended period of two weeks to submit their answers. The Take-home exams take many forms and can combine short answers and questions that may require essay or long-form responses. A significant change however in the THEs from the traditional pen and paper exam is the requirement of citing examples and

references. As THEs are not under the same time pressure as a sit-down exam, the criteria for grading take-home exams should include argumentation, organization, evidence, referencing and language fluency. THEs were considered easy to convert as do not require meaningful change. Critical to this process is that consideration is given to ensure that learners can still produce their writings with the limited resources available to them at home

A systematic review, (Bengtsson, 2019), presents a comprehensive examination of the many aspects of this. THEs. This research highlights the significant support by instructors supporting the use of THEs which far outweighs the dissenting voice discrediting the use of them.

There is a weakness in this review, as it does not directly reflect the views of instructors. Evidence shows through this report that there is unreserved support for take-home exams among learners and this support is deeply rooted in their perception that this assessment method makes life easier for them, learners perceive that they can always pass a THE. The author alludes to previous research that presented a resistance from teachers to this assessment method. However, the assumed resistance among teachers has mostly been insinuated, through third party suggestion. Bengtsson (2019) concedes that the discussion would have been significantly enriched if the number resisting THEs could be quantified.

2.9 Lived Experience Research

There exists a multiplicity of approaches to phenomenology research in education. Eddles-Hirsch (2015) published an excellent and comprehensive resource offering guidance on the different approaches to phenomenological research. The author acknowledges that there is considerable uncertainty about how to use phenomenology as a methodological framework and that the uncertainty is arises from the fact that phenomenology is not one unified approach. Eddles-Hirsch (2015) argues that this approach to research consists of three distinct and complex philosophies. In this document the three philosophies are explored reflecting the work

of the giants of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) Jean-Paul Satre (1905-1980) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). The literature provides a deep understanding of the three philosophies, transcendental, hermeneutic and existential phenomenology. Eddles-Hirsch (2015) argues the importance for a researcher to have a good understanding of these three different approaches to phenomenology when carrying out research because it impacts not only data collection but also the analysis and synthesis of the data. This literature is appropriately referenced and a valuable resource for the novice phenomenological researcher.

According to Fendt et al. (2014) phenomenologists argue on how best to categorise phenomenological approaches. This research again reflects the work of significant figures within the movement and argues that such studies are broadly divided into two distinct approaches, the “Husserlian” and the “Heideggerian” approaches. Gill (2014) concurs with these two broad categorisations. Giorgi (1997) suggests all phenomenological research frameworks should be meticulously descriptive, use phenomenological reduction, explore the deliberate relationship of agent with structure and culture, and ultimately expose the central nature and patterns of meaning that come to life in the human experience. However, van Manen (2007) argues an alternative view, that phenomenological research framework should be interpretive, imbedded in the world in the form of language, social relations and therefore fundamentally connected to our understanding.

2.10 Unexpected Themes in Educational Research.

A number of unexpected themes emerged through the Literature Review., the combined voice of teachers and students in educational research and the balance of gender in research.

There exists significant literature on educational research and many researchers concur that the voice of students in research is rarely heard. It is usually expressed through

teacher's own interpretation of student voice (Cook-Sather, 2006) and student voice of the experience of assessment has been describe as a whisper (Gilmore & Smith, 2008). Sohn et al., (2017) highlights that a phenomenological approach to educational research can be greatly enhanced when focusses on hearing the combined voices of students and teachers. Finally, Tuffour (2017) encourage researchers to take active steps to give voice to the experiences of all participants in educational research.

A second unexpected theme to emerge through the literature review was gender balance in research. In 2014 "Gender balance and gender perspectives in research and innovation- Policy for the Research Council of Norway 2013 – 2017" was published and argues that a diversity of points and perspectives in research strengthen the quality of knowledge produced and that gender perspectives are an important aspect of this diversity. Society is comprised of women and men with biological, social and cultural differences, and that sound research must reflect this. Rich-Edwards (2018) suggests that gender-informed perspective is essential to increase rigor and to promote discovery,

2.11 Critical Analyses of Reviewed Literature

Through the conducting of the literature review, there exists a significant body of research into the key themes of the research area, assessment, perceptions of assessment, changes in assessment practices, and the perceptions of the key stakeholders of a change in practice. Due to the impact of COVID-19 and the closure of libraries the research was limited to access to current literature online. The literature reviewed has been drawn from a wide variety of resources, databases, online libraries, books, peer reviewed journal articles, guideline and frameworks, policy documents and educational support material sourced through a wide variety of search engines. The key search words used were assessment, perceptions, change of assessment, the perceptions a change in assessment practice. The literature comprised of research that was grounded in established theories of teaching,

learning and assessment. In addition, original research from unique perspectives was also examined included in the review.

All the literature contributed to the discussion of the research area but were incomplete. There were three areas that remained untouched, the impact of a pandemic on assessment practices, the combined voices of the stakeholders, instructors and learners in educational research, and the perceptions of the stakeholders to change in assessment methods brought about by a pandemic.

These identified themes provide the rationale for this research area. To put another way, through a review of appropriate literature a gap in knowledge was identified. The completion of this research will add to the current ongoing discussion in the research area and will highlight new areas of research that will contribute to the conversation.

2.12 Summary

This study was driven by a personal interest to understand the lived experience of key stakeholders of the NCCAP to a change in assessment methods brought about by the pandemic, as already declared I lived through the phenomenon myself.

The literature review introduces relevant terminology and provides definitions to clarify how terms are being used in the context of this research. The review also examined the key theme of the research area, assessment, perceptions of assessment, changes in assessment practices, the perceptions of the key stakeholders of such a change in practice. The reviewed literature was critically analysed and through this process identified a gap in the knowledge. It is this gap in knowledge that influenced the development of the research question.

The process of developing the research question started with the consideration of a broad topic of research interest. Chapter Two, the Literature Review, provides detailed background and highlighted that there exists very little research into a change in assessment

method brought about by a pandemic. Through the literature review the following research question:

- What are the perceptions of the key stakeholders of the NCCAP of a change in the terminal assessment method due to the impact of COVID-19?

In addition to the research question the following subsidiary questions were developed to support the main research question:

- How do instructors and learners perceive a change in assessment?
- What influences the perception of assessment and a change in assessment methods?
- What are the implications of the key stakeholders' perception of a change in assessment methods due to the pandemic on assessment practices for the NCCAP?

With the establishment of the research question Chapter Three, Methodology, describes the approach I took, and the justification of every decision that was made, on the journey to answer the research question.

Chapter 3. Methodology.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to address several methodological principles and will start with the clarification of my epistemological and ontological position as a researcher. An introduction to the research design will follow. I will explain the chosen methodology with discussions on the theoretical underpinnings and the rationale for selecting the approach to answer the research question “How do the key stakeholders of the NCCAP perceive a change to the terminal assessment method due to the impact of COVID-19?”

This section will include a personal declaration, acknowledging my position as an insider researcher. A detailed description of participant selection, data collection methods and the development of the interview guide will be discussed. The interview process is described and includes the many challenges that COVID-19 presented in this process. The exact processes and procedures followed for the data analysis plan will be described and also the steps taken to ensure quality within the research itself. Finally, ethical considerations and limitations of the study are considered.

3.2 Ontology and Epistemology Stance

Fundamental components that require clarification are my ontological and epistemological stances. This stance directly impacts the specific methodology and justifies the methods and particular techniques used to gather data.

According to Thomas (2009) ontology is concerned with the nature of the world. Willig (2013) suggests that the realist position believes that there is a single, objective, independent reality, a straightforward relationship between our perception of the world and the actual world that exists. I believe that I can understand how individual participants perceive this phenomenon of change in assessment methods from a subjective standpoint. I am taking a relativist stand as the stakeholders' reality is viewed as relative.

There are, according to Madill et al. (2000) three distinct epistemological perspectives of lived experience research, the realist, the radical constructionist, and the contextual constructionist. Within these three perspectives, Pidgeon and Henwood (1997) suggest that participants understanding can influence knowledge, and that this knowledge is further influenced by researcher interpretation and the context in which both insights are rooted. Jaeger and Rosnow (1998) argues that the role of the researcher is active and contributes to the research process and therefore inevitably are part of the context. As I took an active role in the discovery and construction of knowledge for this study I declare that my epistemological stance is that of the contextual constructionist.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) debate the interrelationship between ontological and epistemological assumptions, concluding the latter has implications for the choice of a particular data collection technique in methodology.

3.3 Research Paradigm

The research question has been restated in the introduction to this section. The research is embedded in the lived experience of the instructors and learners to a change in assessment method brought about by the pandemic. I believe that knowledge can be constructed through the interpretation and reflection on the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon. My personal views of the construction of knowledge are echoed within the constructivist/ interpretive paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that within this paradigm, realities are multiple, and Bunnis and Kelly (2010) conclude that truth is subjective and changing.

Further research by Guba and Lincoln (2013) suggest that objects exist only in the minds of the persons contemplating them and that through accessing such objects that we can build knowledge.

3.4 Phenomenology

The term phenomenology is derived from ancient Greek and translates as 'to appear', and a term was first used by Immanuel Kant in 1764. Rockmore (2011) concluded from a constructivist view that it is the subject who constructs what they know. Within the phenomenological perspective, the subject knows what is built, which is not apparent in themselves but has an appearance in their consciousness.

There exists a multiplicity of approaches to phenomenology research in education. In 2015 Eddles-Hirsch published an excellent resource for clarification on the different approaches to phenomenological study. In this paper he acknowledges that there is considerable doubt about using phenomenology as a methodological framework because that phenomenology is not one unified approach but instead consists of three disparate, complex philosophies. The three philosophies are explored, reflecting the work of the giants of the movement, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Jean-Paul Satre (1905-1980) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). The literature provides a deep understanding of the three philosophies, transcendental, hermeneutic and existential phenomenology. Eddles-Hirsch argues that it is essential to have a good understanding of the three different approaches to phenomenology when conducting research as it impacts on data collection, and analysis and synthesis of the data.

3.5 Research Strategy and Design

Through Chapter Two, the Literature Review, several approaches to research strategy and design were identified and considered. The approach to the strategy and design could not be considered until the research question was finalised. Having developed the research question on the completion of the Literature Review, several decisions were made. The guiding hand in these decisions was how best to answer the research question.

As this research was deeply embedded in the lived experience, it is a phenomenological study. According to Burch (1990), at the very heart of phenomenology is the intelligibility of lived experience. Burch concludes that the association is so close that the focus of the research on lived experience can be a byword for it being 'phenomenological'. The writings of Cresswell (1998) presented the backdrop to the decision on the philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, methods employed and practices of the study. Cresswell debates the various approaches phenomenology, ethnographic, grounded theory, and case studies. As the most direct link between phenomenology as a philosophy is phenomenology as a research method, the decision was to deploy phenomenological research methods.

Through the literature review for this research, the differences between descriptive and interpretive phenomenological approaches were explored, the traditions of Husserl or Heidegger. Frechette et al. (2020) provided a comprehensive comparison between the two, (Appendix A) and the decision was made to adopt the interpretive phenomenological tradition of Heidegger and the theories and methodology of interpretation for this study as the best approach to answer the research question.

The research question highlights that I am not attaching any predetermined hypotheses to test but approaching the research from the perspective of a broad question. Through reviewing the writings of Bryman (2004), it was concluded that as this research sought to connect observations to theory and was therefore an inductive approach.

I would argue that through the literature review, particularly Bryman (2004), which explored the advantages and disadvantages of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Appendix B) and considered the limitations of time to complete the research, that the most appropriate way, at this time, to capture this lived experience is to tap into detailed personal accounts which is best achieved through a qualitative approach. Frechette et al. (2020) propose two approaches, the generic qualitative approach, and the interpretive

phenomenological approach (Appendix C). The interpretive qualitative method was selected because it reflects the constructivist research paradigm and my stance as a researcher, reflective and naturalistic. The decision was further underpinned by the objectives of the research which orientate towards action, practice, and policy. The generic qualitative approach also has implications for sampling, recruitment, and data collection.

I returned to the work of Bryman (2004), who succinctly differentiated between an experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal, comparative and case study design. A comparative design was selected as it captured qualitative data from a number of different individuals. As a researcher, I could observe variables without influencing them.

The advantages and disadvantages of the emic and etic perspectives were explored through the literature review. As I had experienced the change in assessment methods brought about by the pandemic, the research was from the emic perspective, insider research, which aligns with many academics who agree that the emic view is the most relevant in the endeavour of attempting to understand experiences and perceptions within a particular group (Godina & McCoy, 2000).

3.6 Participant Selection

In phenomenology, van Manen (1990) suggests two pre-requisites for participants of the research, they must represent the population and they must have experience of the phenomenon under study. Davidsen (2013) clarifies that the population refer to the whole compilation of individuals who have lived the experience being researched and from which the sample is selected. In this study, the population relates to the instructors and learners of the NCCAP throughout Ireland, who had the experience of the change in assessment method due to the impact of COVID-19 in a FET setting. In line with the suggestion of Converse (2012), purposeful sampling assisted in identifying those individuals who had personal experience of the phenomenon being studied. Purposeful sampling also ensures that a

thorough and exhaustive appreciation of the phenomenon was captured through the participants (Converse, 2012).

The criteria for the selection of the participants were established before the sample extraction. The below three criteria guided the selection of the subjects:

- Participants were qualified instructors who were delivering the NCCAP with varying ranges of experience and roles. By default, all participants had to have an accredited teaching qualification and industry experience to be employed as an instructor.
- Participants were apprentices currently engaged with the NCCAP working in the industry.
- Participants had the opportunity to experience the change in assessment strategy due to the pandemic.

To ensure that the potential participants were recruited voluntarily from the FET settings, an email was circulated to all the NCCAP instructors and learners throughout Ireland providing the background to the research (Appendix D). This was facilitated by KETB, the coordinating provider for the programme. The email outlined the scope and purpose of the research, and those who were inclined to participate were asked to register their interest by return email. Converse (2012) suggested that sample size in a phenomenological study must satisfy benchmarks. The sample size must be adequate to understand the phenomenon and small enough in numbers to enable precise and inciteful extraction from the data. Given the brief period to complete the research, the decision to engage six participants was made, three instructors and three learners and accepted as adequate for the research. A total of twenty-three participants expressed their interest in participating in the study, eight instructors and fifteen learners.

An unexpected theme that emerged through the literature review in Chapter 2 was the implication of gender balance within research, and so this was given due consideration. There

were no female instructors currently delivering the NCCAP in Ireland, and only one female learner had registered. To address the gender balance, the snowballing technique was deployed, an email seeking a referral from the participants who had expressed their interest in taking part in the research to find additional female participants who had similar experiences. This was successful, and the extracted sample consisted of three male instructors, two female and one male learner.

3.7 Interview Guide and Piloting

According to Cresswell (1998), careful planning should be the foundation of semi-structured interviews and that such planning would ensure that the appropriate data to answer the research question was generated. Charmaz (2006), agrees that the fundamental basis of an interview guide is that the questions are well planned and argues that the questions should be open-ended. The influences on perceptions of assessment and perceptions of a change in assessment that emerged through the literature review, and the work of Frechette et al. (2020) provided guidance for the construction of the interview guide. Frechette et al. (2020) suggest significant importance of the wording of the questions, that encourage the participants to recall their own experience of the phenomenon, words such as explain, felt, and describe for example. The interview guide was developed and consisted of thirteen open ended guiding questions (Appendix E). The guide structure was designed thematically, and I drew from my own experience of the phenomenon throughout the development stages of the interview guide, which was based on a “feel for” responses that might be significant, even if unexpected. The questions were designed to probe thoughts and feelings and to illicit a participants’ narrative.

The interview was an attempt to understand the perceptions of the stakeholders to the change in assessment method, so the interview guide allowed for flexibility to allow participants to develop their ideas with as little interference from the interviewer as possible.

The Interview Guide was piloted with non-participants, one instructor and one learner to ensure that the questions reflected their intended meaning and made sense. The interview guide was sent by email to the test interview participants. I am inexperienced as an interviewer and so sought the guidance of Smith et al. (2009), who suggest that a pilot interview should be conducted to minimise the impact of my lack of experience. Two pilot interviews took place between the 3rd and 4th May 2021 and this process confirmed that the questions did reflect their intended meaning and made sense. The pilot interviews further proved a valuable exercise to ensure that the technology worked and afforded an opportunity to familiarise myself with the online platform.

3.8 Interview Process

To investigate the selected stakeholders' lived experience to the fullest extent selecting the most appropriate data collection method is critical. Aspers (2009) argues that phenomenological research should reflect the participants' perceptions and not those of the researcher. The collection process employed should preserve both the participants' perspectives and the role of appropriate theory. Englander (2012) cautions researchers to focus on the phenomenon and not the individual.

Academics suggest various methods, observations or interviews, or a combination of both to gather data in phenomenological research (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Finlay, 2009). Both Husserl (1997) and Giorgi (1997) argue that phenomenological study must include verbal interactions with research participants and that, therefore, interviews are highly appropriate. It has already been established that observation is a valuable source of data but Starks and Trinidad (2007) caution of the probability that noting observations during an interview can be intrusive and difficult to achieve.

In 2012 (Bryman) suggested three main classifications of qualitative research interviews, structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Bryman (2012) provided a detailed

description of the advantages and disadvantages of all three, and semi-structured interviews were selected as they are often used as the primary data source for qualitative research and enable the researcher to explore people's realities from their perspectives through open-ended questions. This approach further enabled the pre-set questions to be supplemented with additional questioning that emerged during the conversation.

Cresswell (2007) suggests that the most common method for conducting semi-structured interviews is face-to-face or over the telephone. However, due to the pandemic, face to face was not possible, and with the advancement in technology, new platforms for conducting interviews were explored, Microsoft Team and Zoom just two. The online platforms also resolve the intrusive issue of noting observations during the discussion (Starks & Trinidad, 2007) as the participant were less aware of the process. However, all participants were informed at the commencement of the interview that notes would be taken throughout the interview itself.

Thus, Zoom the online platform was used to gather the perceptions of the lived experience of both instructors and learners of the NCCAP of the change in terminal assessment method. The discussion of the data collection method above identified that semi-structured interviews as the ideal data gathering approach for this study.

3.9 Data Collection

The interviews were conducted through the Zoom, a user-friendly on-line platform. Zoom was selected as it was familiar to all the participants as it was the preferred online platform for class delivery for the NCCAP. The interviews took place between the 7th and 8th of May 2021. Six individual interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes. The interviews were recorded through Zoom on-line recording facility and stored securely on my computer. A convention was applied to code each interview. The participants were assigned names derived from letters early in the alphabet for

the instructors, Alex, Brian, Charlie, and names starting from letters later in the alphabet were assigned to the learners, Sam, Walter, and Zara.

As already discussed, the decision had been made to collect data through the combination of interview and observation. I engaged in memoing, a process of taking detailed field notes, writing down in my own words thoughts and observations as they occurred to me during the conversations. These notes were handwritten on a hard copy of the interview guide, and the time and date recorded at the time of the interview, to correlate with the recording. The questions in the interview guide were broad and open-ended, this approach encourage the participants to recall and describe their perceptions of the change in assessment method brought about by the pandemic.

My goal was to encourage the stakeholders to engage in purposeful conversation by creating an environment where they could talk freely. It was hoped that inductive analysis would uncover findings that would address the research question.

3.10 Data Storage

The on-line platform Zoom provided a recording facility which was engaged for each of the six interviews, and as suggested by Bailey (2006), permission from all participants to record was sought and received prior to commencement of recording. As previously stated, each interview was coded using an alphabetic convention, the participants were assigned names derived from letters early in the alphabet for the instructors, Alex, Brian, Charlie, and names starting from letters later in the alphabet were assigned to the learners, Sam, Walter, and Zara, and were also time and dated stamped. In the light of the fact that several interviews took place on the same day, in addition to the coding, the date and time of the interview was also noted on each interview. On completion of the interview, the recordings were downloaded immediately from the online platform to a desktop computer, coded as described and electronically filed. The field notes were scanned and filed electronically with

the corresponding interview. Aware of the threat of technology failure, (Easton et al., 2000), as soon as each interview process was completed and downloaded, the interview recording was manually transcribed and printed. This gave me a first opportunity to become familiar with the content of the interview and to add my initial thoughts and observations during the transcribing process. The transcriptions, including my own personal notes were printed, and filed with the field notes taken during each interview. This action ensured that there were multiple copies of the collected data and reduced the risk of loss of valuable data.

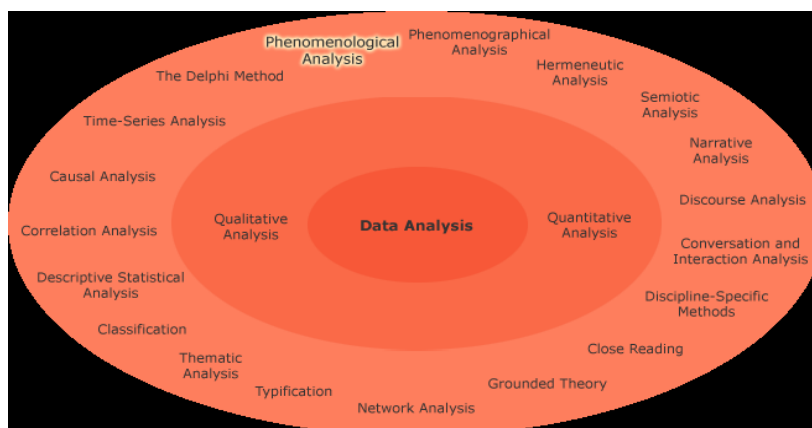
In-line with NCI ethical Guidelines permission to store collected data from the participants was sought and received. All participants were given the undertaking that once the exams process was complete all data collected would be destroyed.

3.11 Data Analysis

There exists an extensive array of approaches to the analysis of data in the execution of qualitative phenomenological research as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Data Analysis Options (www.koppa.jyu.fi)



Consideration was given to several data analysis plans, including Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Grounded Theory and Thematic Analysis (TA), to mention a few. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) TA is widely used in qualitative research and

argue its significance in providing core skills for conducting qualitative analysis. They further suggest that it is a qualitative research method appropriate to a wide range of epistemologies and research. TA assists in the identification, analysis, organisation, description and reporting of themes extracted from the data and can produce trustworthy and insightful findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA has been described as an interpretive process (Smith & Firth, 2011) which entails searching through data to identify patterns that describe the phenomenon being investigated. There are several disadvantages to TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004) which were given careful consideration.

TA is considered to offer great flexibility, but this can also be seen as a potential drawback. Braun and Clarke (2013) highlight that there is a perception of TA, that it is not a rigorous method. Earlier literature by Braun and Clarke (2006), argue that the very flexibility that TA offers, can in-fact, be challenging for some researchers who may struggle to determine which aspects of data to focus on. Braun and Clarke (2006) further suggest that some researchers can also struggle to determine which theoretical or epistemological frameworks to use for data analysis. However, the most significant disadvantage with thematic analysis is that can be more prone to inconsistent or improper use of terminology as compared to other approaches. On a final note, Braun and Clarke suggest that the challenges that TA offer may question the validity of the findings of the research itself.

Having reflected carefully on the advantages and disadvantages of a TA approach, and considering alternative approaches, TA was selected as the most suitable method to identify key themes and address the research question. The process of TA will be guided by the comprehensive guidelines to the pitfalls of this approach by a novice researcher (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

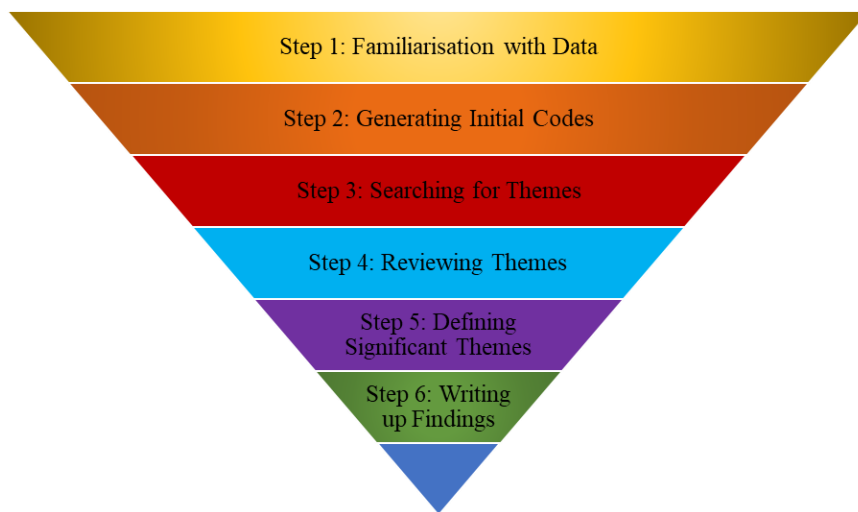
This decision is justified as the study adopted an interpretivist approach and so the alternative data analysis plans were set aside.

3.11.1 Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) developed a six-phase guide (Figure 2) which provided the framework for conducting TA. The data analysis for this research followed this six-step guide, moving from one step to the next as presented in Chapter Four, Findings and Discussion.

Figure 1

The Six Steps of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006)



Step One: For the familiarisation with the data, I immersed myself in the data by manually transcribing each interview, verbatim, from the recorded interviews. I believed that total emersion in the data could only be achieved through manual transcription and any thoughts of software transcription programmes was dismissed. I listened and relistened to the recordings on several occasions and read and reread the transcripts and the detailed memo notes taken during the interviews.

Step 2: Generating initial codes was achieved through the listening and reading processes, referring to detailed notes taken through the listening and transcription process across the entire data and this provided the opportunity to start the identification of patterns and initial codes. This systematic approach identified codes considered as key words and

were supported by extracts from the transcripts themselves. Colour coding was deployed to enable clumping of codes into groups. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) this step focusses on reducing the data and through the reduction process that initial codes are generated. Attride-Stirling (2001) provided guidance where the data was clumped into meaningful and manageable chunks and was, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), the first and most basic level of analysis that is used as an organizational tool. The initial codes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Initial Extraction of Codes.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valued • Untrained • Unsure of content requirement • Time consuming • Lack of consultation • No relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Winging it • Lack of experience • Uncertainty of scoring • Exclusion • Irrelevant • Missed opportunity
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Step 3: Searching for themes was completed by continuing to follow Braun and Clarke (2006) guidance by moving forward to step three which searched for themes by analysing and sorting the codes.

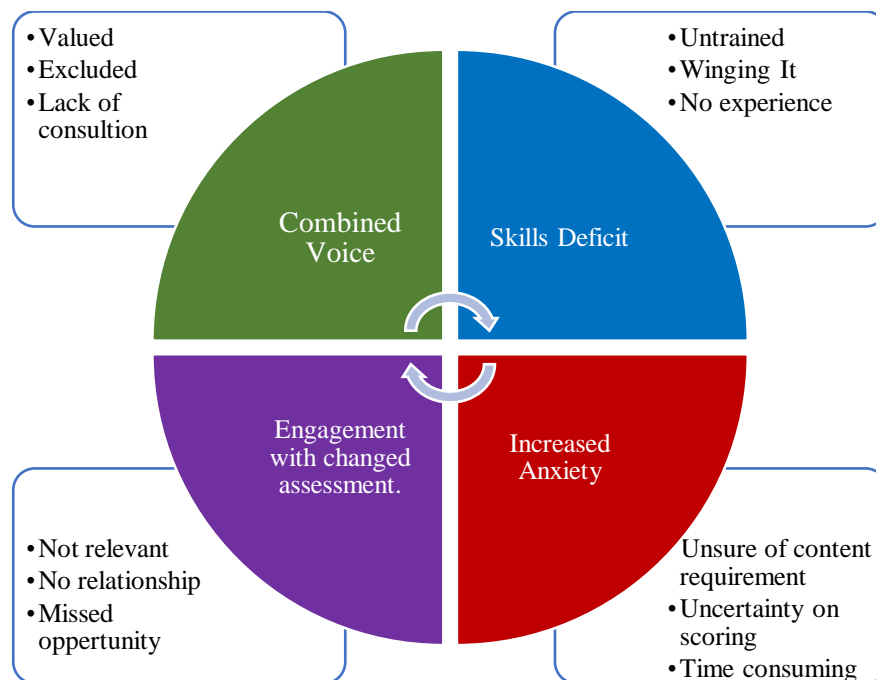
Step 4: Reviewing themes involved checking if the extracted themes worked in relation to the extracts that supported the initial coding across the entire data set and as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) a thematic analysis map was generated of the analysis. This phase focussed on refining the draft themes identified in step three through reading the codes for each theme to clarify if a coherent pattern was evident (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once this had been completed and I was once again I read the entire data set to ensure that the refined

themes were evident through the data itself. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight the significance of this final process as an opportunity to verify if any data that required coding had been missed.

Step five: Defining and naming themes. This continued the ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each identified theme, and the overall story that the analysis communicated, and aided the generation of clear definition and names for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal of this phase was to be able to “clearly define what your themes are and what they are not” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). To achieve this the focus was on defining each theme, identifying the meaning of the theme, and determining what aspect of the data and research questions the theme corresponds to (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process is presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Defining and Naming of Themes



Step six: Writing up the findings, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was a final opportunity for analysis and to relate the analysis back to the research questions and literature and produce a report of the analysis. This is the final phase which focused on analysis of the data and writing a narrative about the data that provides a succinct, clear, and engaging account of the narrative the data told both from within and across each theme.

3.12 Rigour

In all qualitative research, including phenomenological research, consideration is required to determine whether a study is credible, accurate, and true, and if other individuals can use it outside of those who participated in the research. To achieve this, consideration was given to the core concepts of validity, reliability, and generalisability.

3.12.1 Validity, Reliability, Generalisability

To maximise validity of the analysis of data several methods were deployed. Ashworth (1997) suggest that the researcher should explicitly state presuppositions and acknowledge subjective judgements. This was achieved by my personal declarations as an insider researcher. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that prolonged engagement with the data increases validity and this was achieved through several months of listening to recording, reading, and rereading the transcripts and the detailed notes taken during the interviews. In-line with the suggestion by Johnson (1997) verification was sought from the participants by providing transcripts of the interviews to each participant and receiving back confirmation from them that the transcripts were a true and accurate record of the interview and the experience as narrated. To increase validity further low interference descriptors were used and this was achieved using participants' verbatim accounts (Johnson 1997). Finally, as suggested by Robson (1993) engagement with peer review was achieved through regular discussion of the ongoing analysis and findings through peer evaluation.

Several strategies were deployed to maximise reliability. Evidence of a detailed audit trail is provided as recommended by Koch (1994) which included all the documentation to support every step in the research process. Ashworth (1997) argues that disclosing my personal orientation and context further enhances reliability and this was achieved through the inclusion of a personal anecdote.

There was concentrated engagement with the material, moving backwards and forwards between the transcripts and the interpretation (Erlandson et al., 1993; Stiles, 1993) and the interpretation was grounded within the data using verbatim illustration (Johnson, 1997). Finally, the trial interview process ensured the technical accuracy in the recordings and, setting aside software, transcribing the interviews manually ensured complete accuracy (Peräkylä, 1997).

Generalisability is defined by Burt et al. (2003) as the extent to which research findings are transferable to, or appropriate for, situations outside of this research. Such may be enhanced by providing detailed information on the participants, selection methods, context, data generation, and data analysis. The purpose of providing this information was to enable the readers to make an informed decision on how far and to whom the findings of this research may be generalised.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

The National College of Ireland's (2019) Ethical Code for Educational Programme Research involving human participants was read and understood. The research was conducted in an ethical manner in line with NCI guidelines, respecting persons and protecting the wellbeing of participants. Approval was sought and granted by the NCI Educational Ethics sub-Committee (Appendix F). All participants signed a consent form in advance of the interview process (Appendix G).

Approval was also secured from KETB, the coordinating provider for the NCCAP to conduct this research.

To ensure confidentiality of participants every effort was made to remove any narratives or words that could be traced back to either the participants or to their organisations. Examples of this were the participants' names or references to the training centres they were attached to.

The data analysis and interpretation processes were anonymous, interview recordings and transcripts were coded through the application of a convention as described in Chapter Three. A convention was applied where names were assigned alphabetically to the instructors drawn from letters early in the alphabet, Alex, Brian, Charlie, and names starting from letters later in the alphabet were assigned to the learners, Sam, Walter, and Zara.

Exceptional care was taken to ensure that the participants' exact words were preserved through manual transcription from the recordings and ensured through replaying the recordings several times to guarantee full accuracy of transcription. The exception to this was the removal of any narrative that might be considered to breach confidentiality or could lead to identification of the participant or training centre, in such cases these words were redacted in the transcripts. To guarantee the preservation of the actual words of the participants, a transcript of each interview was presented to each participant to verify that it was an accurate account of the interview. All were returned without any alterations.

All data was stored in line with NUI guidelines and destroyed on completion of the Exam Boards process as committed to the participants in the consent form.

Furthermore, aware of the need to reduce the risk of bias resulting from my position as a member of the group being studied, this issue was addressed through my personal declaration.

3.14 Limitations to the Study.

The study focused on the lived experience of the key stakeholders to the change in assessment methods brought about by the pandemic. As with all research, there are limitations to this piece of research.

The results were confined to the participants' experiences within the NCCAP programme and the interpretation of their experience. Each participant of the NCCAP is an expert in their own perceptions and the participant provided an understanding of how they perceived the phenomenon through their own words (Reid et al., 2005). The experiences of the students selected were theirs, and theirs alone. Although the participants may have shared commonalities, this study did not attempt to generalize to the greater population (Smith et al., 2009).

The short timeframe to complete this research had several limiting implications for this research. Due to time constraints, just six months to complete the research, it was not possible to review all the literature of the research area and as the impact of COVID-19 on education is so recent, new literature is emerging on an ongoing basis. Time and memory of the participants experience is a limitation, as the participants selected had completed the changed assessment method several months before they participated in this research. The six participants may not have recalled specific or critical issues or events that may have implications for this research due to the passing of time. Ideally, I would have liked more time to have the opportunity to re-interview the participants after the initial analysis of data to explore and probe deeper into the emerging themes. I have already discussed the challenges of TA in Chapter Three and would also have liked to present the interpretation of the data to the participants to ensure that I had interpreted their experience correctly, but unfortunately time would not allow for this.

A further limitation to this research was the access restrictions of interviewing the participants face to face due to COVID-19 restrictions. Due to the limited access, interviews were conducted through the online platform Zoom, and due to this some of the emotions and nuances usually captured in a face-to-face interview may have been lost which may have contributed significantly to the interpretation.

It is important to be aware of the limitation that may be researcher bias. I worked within the FET environment and was an instructor delivering the NCCAP I was also one of the team of instructors who designed the changed assessment. While steps were taken throughout the process to mitigate researcher bias, it is accepted that no matter how vigilant, it is not possible to eliminate the bias of an insider researcher.

3.15 Summary

This chapter addressed several methodological principles that justified the approach to this research. My epistemological and ontological position as a researcher were clarified and a description of the research design provided. This chapter explains the process for the selection of participants and explains the development of the interview guide, piloting, data collection methods and the protocols surrounding data storage. Consideration was given to the variety of data analysis plans, thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate approach to answer the research question and while considered was given to other alternatives, they were set aside. Ethical considerations are presented and the procedures that were put in place to ensure quality within the research itself described. This chapter also addresses the limitation to this study.

Having justified the methodological approach and completed the data analysis process, Chapter Four will present the findings and discussion.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion.

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this thematic study was to explore the lived experiences the stakeholders of the NCCAP to a change in the terminal assessment method brought about by the pandemic. This change of assessment method was introduced to ensure the continuation of the programme throughout the lockdown period introduced by the Irish Government in March 2020 which necessitated the closure of all FET centres nationwide. Chapter four begins by providing a restatement of the research questions. Data was collected from six participants through semi-structured interviews and manually transcribed verbatim. For this study, Braun and Clarke (2006) six steps for TA was adopted as the methodological approach to code the data and identify the emergent themes of the study.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Methodology, all six participants were assigned names derived from letters early in the alphabet for the instructors, Alex, Brian, Charlie, and names starting from letters later in the alphabet were assigned to the learners, Sam, Walter, and Zara. A second convention was applied to the direct quotations of participants inserted to this section of the dissertation. Where words, sentences or whole sections are excluded from the participant quotation without altering the meaning from quotation have been omitted, ellipsis have been inserted as follows [. . .].

This chapter focuses on the experience of the participants, a narrative of the findings follows, and the chapter concludes with an overall summary of the findings and discussion.

4.2 Research Question

The process of developing the research question was described in Chapter Two, the Literature Review. It is important however, to restate the research question to act as a guide through Findings and Discussions.

The research question was How do the key stakeholders of the NCCAP perceive a change to the terminal assessment method due to the impact of COVID-19?

4.3 Themes

The four significant emerging themes from the collected data for this research were combined voice in decision making process, increased anxiety within a changed assessment method, the skills set for a changed assessment method and engagement with changed assessment methods.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Student Voice in Decision Making Process

Student voice has been defined as an emergent and complex concept which refers to students in dialogue, discussion and consultation on issues that concern them in relation to their education, assessment being just one of these concerns (Fleming, 2017).

In analysing the data, this theme was evident within the lived experience of both the instructors and the learners within the decision-making process of the change in assessment method for the NCCAP brought about by COVID-19. KETB, In the sharing of their perceptions of the alternative assessment five of the six participants expressed disappointment that the discussion around the alternative assessment did not include all the stakeholders, that the voice of the learner was not included in the decision-making process.

In discussion with the instructors, “Alex” is quoted as saying that “This was a significant change for the programme and should have included all the stakeholders’ views [. . .] before a final decision was made.” “Alex” added further by saying. “I believe the voice of all stakeholders should have been heard in this process.” “Brian” concurred with this view, “... there seemed to be a lot of pressure and time constraints involved and the decision seemed very rushed and not well thought through, there was very little consensus amongst the stakeholders, in fact some were not consulted at all.” “Charlie” added by saying “I feel all stakeholders should have been involved in the discussion, excluding any of them from the

conversation just didn't feel right. I know that a decision needed to be made but all views should have been considered."

In analysis of the data collected from the learners there was a divergence in opinion on the point of student voice within the decision-making process. "Walter" expressed the view that "The alternative assessment was presented to us without any reference to or discussion with us ... I think that we should have been consulted." However, not all agreed. "Zara" was not in agreement on this view and commented that "A decision had to be made to get the theory exams completed and I don't think all the stakeholders' views were necessarily relevant. It was about making a decision quickly to keep the programme on track, you know the old saying, too many cooks!"

In Chapter 2, the Literature Review, "The Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessment" published by QQI (2020) was reviewed. Within these guidelines QQI recommend that providers communicate alternative assessment arrangements to learners in a timely and efficient manner. The purpose of this approach to communication was to ensure learners have sufficient time and resources to engage with these alternative assessments adequately and confidently. Following the implementation of alternative assessments QQI published "The Impact of COVID-19, Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education" (2020). This presented a comprehensive review of the implementation and impact of the deployment of alternative assessment methods across fifty-eight adult education institutions throughout Ireland. However, QQI's research did not identify any concerns across the stakeholders of a lack of student voice within the decision-making process of the change in assessment method.

The interpretation of the data collected for this research has identified a concern among five of the six participants of a lack of inclusiveness of the voice of all the stakeholders

for the NCCAP within the process of change and therefore is an issue for future consideration.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Increased Anxiety

Test anxiety has been defined as “the negative affect, worry, physiological arousal, and behavioural responses that accompany concerns about failure or lack of competence on an exam or similar evaluative situation” (Matthews et al., 2006, p. 175).

Through the analysis and interpretation of the data, I found the theme of increased anxiety evident within the lived experience of both the instructors and the learners. What was interesting within this theme was a divergence in the influencing factors between the two sets of stakeholders.

From the learner perspective there were several contributing factors to an increase in the levels of anxiety. Learners assumed that the extended timeframe for the assessment from the traditional one and a half hours to a two-week period for completion demanded greater content. “Sam” commented that

“I felt under more pressure to add much more content than the original exam because we were given so much more time to complete and after submission. I suppose that had to do with the fact that the assessment was very different from the original exam.”

“Walter” also reflected the following,

“There seemed a bigger expectation on how much we had to write with the alternative assessment ... the old exam was five really short answers and three longer paragraph type answers. This take-home exam put much more pressure to give much longer answers and I wasn’t sure if I had given enough information.”

A second aspect of the uncertainty around the assessment submission which contributed to increased levels of anxiety for learners was the absence of a sense of how well the learner did in the exam itself.

“Sam” commented that

“I knew from the original exam if I had passed or not because I knew that I had got the five short questions right or wrong ... getting them right got me almost through so if I got those right and with a good attempt at the long questions I knew I had passed. Because I was unsure of what exactly was required for the alternative assessment I didn’t know if I had passed or not which stressed me out.”

“Walter,” a learner stated that

“I felt that the questions in the new exam were a bit confusing and not very clear. The old exam was very straightforward but the new exam was asking for information on things that didn’t seem to go together, it was quite confusing.”

Two of the instructors shed some light on the learner’s perceptions of the alternative assessment and agreed that the new structure caused some confusion and increased anxiety.

“Alex” noted that:

“I felt that using the existing exam material and rolling a number of questions into one was very unclear. The original exam structure clearly tested the learning outcomes in a number of ways but combining questions while ensuring that the learning outcomes were being tested made it more difficult for the learner.”

“Charlie,” an instructor commented that:

“I just think it would have been a better option to rewrite the entire assessment piece as this quick adaption simply was not successful. The learners already struggled in general with the original theory exam and this hybrid just made that worse”

“Charlie” continued by saying that “The feedback I got from our Commis was that they found the assessment confusing, and it caused them additional stress as they had no idea if they had made a good submission or not.”

The learners also found the take-home exam much more time consuming and as such preferred the original in-class exam as it was just one and a half hours to display their knowledge rather than two weeks completing essay type questions. “Walter” commented “I know we were given two weeks to complete the take-home exam, but it took much more time than the usual one and a half hours. I ran out of time so was very stressed out by the time I emailed my answer sheet.” “Zara” added to this view, “I don’t think it was fair asking us to spend more time on the take-home. This created more pressure and stress than the old exam.”

From the instructors’ perspective all three described feelings of increased anxiety regarding the grading of the alternative assessment. The development of the new assessment necessitated the production of new grading rubrics which added to the time pressure for the completion of the alternative assessments. “Alex” commented that:

“The alternative assessment necessitated an alternative approach to grading. The traditional pen and paper exam was very straight forward to grade ... it was five short questions that were either right or wrong in the original paper and the longer questions were much clearer on what information was required. The alternative assessment piece was less clear on what was required and as such significantly harder to mark, ensuring that the marking scheme was completely transparent.”

“Brian” added that:

“Aside from the issues on the paper itself, grading was a nightmare. Maybe it was that it was always going to be the way but it took significantly longer to grade the paper than the original pen and paper and I don’t think enough consideration was given to this aspect of the change in assessment method and ensuring all learners were given the same opportunity to score.”

Charlie said that:

“I was very comfortable with the original marking scheme but having to change the grading rubric was extremely time consuming and particularly because the questions were unclear for the learners. The responses were a bit all over the place ... it was a bit of a nightmare.”

There was unmistakable evidence within the interpretation of the data collected through the semi-structured interviews of a perceived increase in anxiety among the stakeholders of the NCCAP brought about by the change in assessment method due to COVID-19. Through Chapter Two, the Literature Review, Nisbett and Ross (1980) suggest that for learners, this perception is influenced by motivations such as fear, and that this fear is as a direct result from past painful experiences. However, none of the learners suggested this link, they welcomed the change in assessment method, but suggested that the fear was due to an unknown expectation of the response content and greater investment of time that the changed assessment method demanded.

All three instructors also expressed an increased level of anxiety. In the Literature Review, there exists a substantial body of research that concludes that instructor anxiety of changed assessment methods is deeply rooted the professional unease that unknown situations and innovation can cause, a fear of change, anxiety about chaos, and a professional concern for maintaining established values and standards (Cuban, 1998; Kelchtermans, 2005; Waugh & Punch, 1987). In the analysis of the collected data the increased levels of fear and anxiety was in alignment with a perception of the unknown where instructors had to develop a new rubric and marking scheme for the assessment. However, there was no sense evident of a perception of unease or concern of innovation as all instructors welcomed the changed assessment method. Furthermore, since the take-home exam/assignment was simply a redesign of the original theory paper, using the same content and testing the same learning

outcomes, the interpretation of the instructor's semi-structured interviews did not uncover any question of an undermining of the established values and standards of the assessment or the qualification itself.

The findings of this study challenge "The Impact of COVID-19, Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education" (2020) published by QQI, who concluded that all stakeholders found the change in assessment less stressful. This research, however, does align with the findings of Burke and Dempsey (2020) who uncovered significant increase stress levels within the teacher cohort

4.3.3 Theme 3: Skills Set for Completion of the Changed Assessment Method

According to Tether et al (2005), skills and skill levels are defined as a varied combination of education, training, and experience. The interview questions were designed to probe if the stakeholders felt that they had the necessary skills to engage with the new assessment method. A divergence of experience emerged from the analysis of the data between the learners and the instructors which was unexpected.

All three learners shared that they felt they had the necessary skills to complete the alternative assessment. "Sam" said that "I had completed assignments before for this course so had no problem researching and answering the take-home exam questions." A second learner "Walter" added that "The take-home exam was just like the other assignments we had done before so I felt very well prepared for the alternative assessment." The same experience was expressed by "Zara" who said that "The new assessment structure was very familiar to me and I am well use to working on the laptop so was happy enough to research and complete the assessment at home."

However, during the interviews and the data analysis the instructors recalled different perceptions of their experiences of engagement with the alternative assessment.

Two of the instructors recalled a skills deficit when asked to write the new assessment pieces. “Alex” noted that:

“I had never written assessment pieces before so was very unsure on how to approach this process. I was winging it and felt that either we shouldn’t have been asked to do this or were provided some level of training.”

This perception was echoed by Brian who said that “I wasn’t prepared at all for this task. I had never written assessments before” adding that:

“Working with the existing assessment material offered little comfort as I hadn’t done this before, I just cut and pasted from the existing material to create combined questions and was very unsure if this was the right way to approach such a task.”

However, “Charlie” had experience of writing assessment pieces before so was very confident comfortable engaging with the alternative assessment but did recall that “I had written assessment pieces before but I did get the feeling that other instructors had not engaged with this type of academic work previously and really felt that training should have been offered.”

Within the theme of Skills Set, the experience of the learners was as expected. In the QQI report “The Impact of COVID-19, Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education” (2020) the initial findings highlighted that the learner data suggested that most learners felt confident in their ability to complete their assessments and their shared narrative reflected this experience. The interpretation of the data collected for this research also found this to be the case.

However, the experience of the instructors that emerged from the data was unexpected. I had written assessment pieces for several years for culinary programmes and expected the other instructors to be similarly experienced in this area. Of the three instructors only one had experience of writing assessment pieces. However, in interpreting the data all

three felt that training should have been provided for those who had no experience of writing assessment pieces, and this reflects the findings of “The Impact of COVID-19, Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education” (2020). This also presents an alternative view to the findings of Burke and Dempsey (2020) who reported that while there was an increase in the levels of stress amongst teachers it was not attributed to a lack of skills.

4.3.4 Theme 4: Engagement with a Change in Assessment

In the educational context engagement is defined as the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion a stakeholder shows. A significant finding within the analysis of the data were several contributing factors that influenced the levels of engagement with the alternative assessment method by the stakeholders of the NCCAP.

All stakeholders questioned the authenticity of the original traditional pen and paper assessment. In interview “Sam” felt that the original assessment bore “little relevance to the real world” and in interview “Zara” shared that “I don’t feel that the original assessment reflected the job that I do or that the questions I was being asked were useful to me at all in the kitchen.”

Like the learners all three instructors questioned the authenticity of the original assessment and agreed that the original theory pen and paper exam bore no relevance to the real world. “Alex” stated that “The Continuous and Practical Assessments were spot on for assessing such a practical skill, they were realistic to the workplace. But the Theory Exam was totally irrelevant to the practical world and needed to be overhauled.” “Brian” went further by sharing that “The Theory Exam was never an appropriate assessment method for a practical skill and was always a struggle for the learners to engage with.”

All stakeholders welcomed the development and deployment of an alternative assessment method and were looking forward to engaging with the new assessment, however diverse experiences of the alternative assessment were uncovered from the data analysis.

All the learners expressed overall satisfaction with the alternative assessment, engaged well with it although still challenged the authenticity of the examination. “Walter” stated that:

“It was an easier assessment to complete because I was able to research the answers at home but I didn’t think it was relevant to my job, kind of same as the previous exam. Yeah, I was basically happy with it.”

“Sam” shared this experience commenting that “I preferred the new assessment because I don’t like having to sit in a classroom and try to remember facts, much easier to do the assessment at home.”

“Zara” also felt

“[. . .] that new assessment still wasn’t really relevant to the job [. . .] but it was a better experience being able to find the answers at home and then complete the paper at home. I much preferred the new assessment because of that.”

However, the instructors unanimously expressed disappointment at the authenticity of the changed assessment method and considered that the change deployed was a missed opportunity.

“Alex” noted that

“When I heard that we would be changing the theory assessment so that the programme could continue, [. . .] I was delighted. I thought it was a great opportunity to resolve a very obvious flaw in the existing assessment method. However, as we were only allowed use the existing assessment material, [. . .] it was just a cut a paste job and I think the overall result was highly unsatisfactory.”

“Brian” echoed this feeling and shared that

“I was really happy that we were in a position to change a really unsatisfactory assessment but developing the new assessment by just combining short questions into long questions and rehashing the longer questions to create a take-home exam was not the way this should have been done.”

“Charlie” noted that “I was delighted that we were in a position to change a flawed, irrelevant and inappropriate assessment method but this process was rushed, poorly thought through and a missed opportunity, yes, I’m very disappointed.”

Gulikers et al. (2008) documented a gap between student and teacher perceptions of authenticity. They argue that there is a divergence of perception, that assessment that instructors felt were authentic were not considered to be authentic by learners. In this research (Guikers et al 2008) suggest that learners’ perceptions of authenticity are based on relevance to the real world while teachers’ perceptions are based on the assessment assessing the learning outcomes for the module. In the analysis of the data for this research both the learners and instructors were of the same mind, that the traditional invigilated pen and paper exam did not reflect the real world. It is for this reason that both stakeholders welcomed the development of an alternative assessment.

Both sets of stakeholders welcomed the development of an alternative assessment method in response to the pandemic. However, in sharing their individual and unique experience of the alternative assessment both the learners and instructors agreed that the question of reflecting the real world was not addressed through the alternative assessment. In fact, the instructors spoke as one when they expressed their disappointment that the development of the alternative assessment was a lost opportunity to respond to this important aspect of authenticity. It is suggested that the decision to simply restructure the assessment

content from the invigilated exam to the take-home exam/assignment limited the opportunity to resolve this issue.

Struyven et al. (2005) suggests that student perception of traditional assessment methods is that such assessments are unfair. The analysis of the data collected for this research did not suggest a perceived unfairness of the original assessment but through the analysis of the data the sub-theme of unfairness emerged. This level of unfairness, according to the learners, was attributed to the elevated level of invested time required to complete the assignment.

From a student perspective Struyven et al. (2008) concluded that learners perceive changes in assessment methods as unknown assessments and are unloved. However, as learners experience become more familiar with changed assessment their preferences change positively and finally their perceptions of the assessment method will be align with their preferences. The learners welcomed the change in assessment and the data shows no evidence of any suspicion. All the learners did express the view that they preferred the alternative assessment over the traditional pen and paper exam and this finding aligns with Traub and MacRury (1990) who concluded that students prefer assessment methods that allow them to score marks with less effort. While there were concerns from the learners as to how they thought they scored in the assessment piece, all concurred that they found the alternative assessment easier to complete.

4.4 Summary

The aim of this chapter was to discuss in a broader context the findings of the study in relation to existing literature within the research area. The chapter further aims to highlight how the findings validate, augment and advances existing research studies, and linking the findings to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Four significant themes emerged from the data analysis, student voice in the decision-making process, increased anxiety within a

changed assessment method, the skills set for a changed assessment method and engagement with changed assessment methods. The TA of the lived experience suggests that both stakeholders express negative perceptions of the change in assessment method. Within the four significant themes extracted from the data in Chapter Three, the aim of this chapter was achieved by addressing the research question and sub-question. By addressing the research question and sub-question the dissertation has provided a deeper and richer understanding of the stakeholders' lived experiences of the stakeholders of the NCCAP within the FET environment in Ireland of a change in terminal assessment method brought about by the pandemic.

These findings and discussion provide the background to the implications for practice and also recommendations for future research which are now presented in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the main conclusions from the research into the perceptions of the key stakeholders of the NCCAP to a change in terminal assessment method brought about by the pandemic. Within the limited timeframe a comprehensive Literature Review was conducted rooted in the main themes of the research area, context for the research, purpose and importance of assessment, theories of perception, stakeholders' perception of assessment and of a change in assessment. This was a lived experience study and therefore a phenomenological qualitative study. Chapter three, Methodology, justified that the data was collected through semi-structured interviews from six participants, three instructors and three learners, engaging with the NCCAP and that the data was analysed through TA using an interpretive lens. Significant themes were identified within the data collected and the findings and discussion were presented in Chapter Four linking back to the literature review of Chapter Two. Chapter Five now presents the overall conclusions and contribution to the research area and the potential limitations to the research. Consideration to how the findings can translate into recommendations for practice and also for future research are discussed. Finally, a brief conclusion will bring this dissertation to a completion.

5.2 Overall Conclusion and Contribution

The findings conclude that although there was evidence of variance between the perceptions of the instructors and learners of a change in assessment method brought about by COVID-19, there was substantial evidence of commonalities between the stakeholders. There were four significant themes extracted from the semi-structured interviews with the six participants, the combined voice in decision making process, increased anxiety within a changed assessment method, the skills set for a changed assessment method and engagement with changed assessment methods.

All the participants agreed the importance of including the stakeholders in the decision-making process. The stakeholders shared the perception of an increase level of anxiety experienced through the change in assessment method and that there were several different factors that contributed to the anxiety. An unexpected finding was the skills deficit that the instructors felt to empower them to engage with the change in assessment process. Finally, while all the stakeholders did engage with the changed assessment it was considered a flawed process and were content to return to the traditional pen and paper exam once the lockdowns eased. There was one variance in this finding which was that the learners preferred the changed assessment method but only on the grounds that the individual felt it was easier to complete at home in their own time.

The findings align with the literature but also challenged the findings of some earlier researchers. A significant finding is the lack of training that instructors received to empower them to engage with the change in assessment method and this is an area that needs to be addressed. This research provides insights into the lived experiences of educators and learners who navigated a change in assessment method due to COVID-19 with little to nothing to draw from but their skill of adaption and with very little guidance or support.

The data contributes to a clearer understanding of instructors' and learners' perceptions of a change in assessment method deployed during the extended period of national emergency as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide closures of all FET centres during the lockdown periods of 2020 and 2021. The findings add to the existing literature on this emerging research area.

5.3 Recommendation for Further Research

This research study shares the experiences of the key stakeholders of the NCCAP during a period of lockdown as a result of COVID-19, and the need to modify assessment methods to ensure continuation of the programme during this time. Just as it informs the

many challenges faced by instructors and learners it exposes significant areas for further research and I would make the following recommendations.

The overarching topic of disruption to assessment could be explored further in relation to the process of change management in educational assessment due to an unforeseen and unexpected force, a pandemic. This is highly significant as the changed assessment was perceived negatively by the participants of this study and the changed assessment method was perceived as flawed and a missed opportunity.

Further research can be considered on learner academic achievement for the NCCAP as a result of a change in assessment method and the possible implications of a change in assessment methods on the quality of the QQI level 6 qualification.

Within in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on education, possible directions for research include engagement and training for the designers of the changed assessment method. Also worthy of study is the skills that instructors and learners require to successfully engage with changes in assessment methods.

I would recommend further research into the migration to online teaching and learning and the possible impact on learners' preparedness for assessment through this emerging platform.

In Chapter Two, The Literature Review, two unexpected themes emerged, the combined voice of teachers and students and the issue of gender balance in research. Both sets of participants expressed a strong perception of a lack of inclusion in the decision-making process for the change in assessment method. It is recommended therefore that the concept of teachers and students as partners in education be given further consideration. In Chapter Four, Findings and Discussions, there is evidence of a divergence in perception of male and female participants. While this research did not specifically focus on the impact of gender balance within the research the findings suggest that it would be of interest to

investigate further the role of gender within perception of a change in assessment method brought about by the pandemic.

Finally, I suggest further research should be conducted into the success, or not, of the migration to a changed assessment method in response to a pandemic for the NCCAP and to address, for the benefit of all stakeholders in the process, any issues that may threaten the success of such a change.

The extreme disruption of the COVID-19 during 2020 and 2021 on FET has provided opportunities for research into educational topics that are worthy of pursuit. My study situates itself in the current literature with regards to instructor and learner perceptions of a change in assessment method. Its findings led to several recommendations for additional research.

5.4 Final Concluding Thoughts.

This study was an Interpretative Phenomenological Study Exploring the Key Stakeholders' Perceptions of a change in Terminal Assessment Method for the NCCAP, in Ireland, due to the impact of COVID-19.

This study was situated within Further FET and the NCCAP delivered through education and training centres across Ireland and included the design and implementation of a change in assessment method for the programme due to the impact of a pandemic. It sought to explore the lived experiences of the key stakeholders of the programme, the instructors and the learners, who have engaged with the changed assessment method developed as a direct result of the impact COVID-19. This study held personal and professional interest for me as both a researcher as well as my role as an instructor for the NCCAP. The research topic was chosen through my professional interest in the experience of this change in assessment method and the current ongoing debates and emerging research gaps in a change in assessment methods brought about by a pandemic. It is the ambition that this study would provide examples and produce knowledge on the impact that the changed assessment method

had on the NCCAP and would potentially contribute to a broader knowledge of the development and successful migration to a change in assessment methods within FET impacted by a pandemic.

The full impact of the closure of FET centres and the change in assessment methods for the NCCAP as a result of the COVID-19 on instructors and learners, may never be known. The best I could have hoped to achieve was to know and understand the perceptions of the stakeholders to the change in assessment methods. This study has provided a unique insight into the perceptions of change in assessment methods brought about by COVID-19. The carefully considered and executed research process suggested recommendations for practice and for future research and therefore I submit that the aims and objectives have been achieved and that this study has answered the research question, “What are the perceptions of the key stakeholders of the NCCAP to a change to the terminal assessment method due to the impact of COVID-19?” and the subsidiary questions of “How do instructors and learners perceive a change in assessment?”, “What influences the perception of assessment and a change in assessment methods? and finally “What are the implications of the key stakeholders’ perception of a change in assessment methods due to the pandemic on assessment practices for the NCCAP?”.

Personal Reflections

I have found that engaging in this research has been both personally and professionally rewarding for me, and I feel that my knowledge, research and writing skills have increased immensely throughout the process. I have enjoyed this process, most of the time, but it was not without its significant challenges. There are things that I wish would have been different and others that I would approach differently next time, the benefits of hindsight and experience. I have enormously benefitted from the strong relationships that have been forged with my lecturers and also my peers who have shared this journey with me every step of the way. I am grateful that these relationships helped me overcome self-doubts that threatened to overwhelm me when the going got tough. I believe that this experience has profound and far-reaching implications for my teaching practice, far beyond the completion of a dissertation. I feel fortunate to have gained an in-depth insight into the experience of the stakeholders of the NCCAP. My interest in changes in assessment practices brought about by unforeseen and unexpected events has gained momentum throughout the research process and I will continue to follow researchers as they embark on their own journey of discovery of the impact that COVID-19 had, and continues to have on education. I look forward with great excitement to returning to work in September for a new academic year with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence. I think this experience will help me in my educational practice and I now have a better understanding of how I can support by colleagues and cohort of learners through a change in terminal assessment methods brought about by a pandemic.

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Appendices.

Appendix A: Husserlian versus Heideggerian Phenomenological Approach.

Husserlian Phenomenological Approach	Heideggerian Phenomenological Approach
Descriptive	Interpretive
Question of what is known	Question of what is experienced and understood
Mechanical view of person	Person is viewed as a self-interpreting being
Person lives in world of objects	Person exists in and is part of the world.
Analysis focusses on the meaning given to a subject.	Analysis is the relationship between the subject and the situation.
What is shared is the essence of the conscious mind	What is shared is culture, history, and language
Meaning is untouched by the interpreter's view of the world.	Interpreter's world view plays a role in interpreting data.
Subject's meaning can be reconstituted by perceiving data to speak for itself	The interpretation of subjects' meanings can only highlight what is already understood.
Strict procedures of interpretation guarantee validity.	Development of individual criteria ensuring rapport.

Appendix B: Quantitative versus Qualitative Methods

Research Design	Research Strategy	
	Quantitative	Qualitative
Experimental	Typical form : Quantitative comparison between experimental and control groups with regard to dependent variables	No Typical form
Cross-Sectional	Survey research or structured observation on a sample at a single point in time.	Qualitative interviews or focus groups at a single point in time.
Longitudinal	Survey on a sample on more than one occasion.	Ethnographic research over a long period of time.
Case Study	Survey research on a single case with a view to revealing important features about its nature.	Intensive study by ethnography or qualitative interviewing of a single case.
Comparative	Survey research in which a direct comparison between two or more cases, as in cross cultural research.	Ethnographic or qualitative interview research on two or more cases.

Research strategy and research design (Bryman 2004 p. 56, adapted)

Appendix C: Generic versus Interpretive Study

Research Process	Generic Qualitative Study	Interpretive Phenomenological Study
Disciplinary Roots	None	Interpretive Phenomenology
Researchers paradigm	Constructivist	Constructivist Unique understanding of being
Researcher's Stance	Reflective Naturalistic	Embodiment Epistemology
Objectives & Research Question	Orientated towards action, practice and policy.	Orientated towards understanding/ uncovering lived experience of individuals in constant being with others
Sampling and Recruitment	Purposeful sampling	Purposeful sampling
Data Collection	Interviews, observations.	Interviews
Data Analysis	Often Content and Thematic Analysis. Low interference	Hermeneutic Analysis. Interpretive.

Appendix D: Ethics Submission Form.

Ethics Application Checklist

To be submitted alongside the 3 page document.

Please complete the below checklist, ticking each item to confirm that it has been addressed.

1. I agree to obtain voluntary and informed written consent/assent from all participants who are involved in this research (or if circulating digitally, I will ensure that informed consent is completed, and will have the participants indicate their informed consent by continuing with their study engagement).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. I agree to obtain informed written consent from the parents of anyone aged under 18 in this research (or from the schools if appropriate), and informed written assent from those under 18 in this research.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3. I address participants in the research as individuals with rights and acknowledge their contribution. This can mean not labelling participants as 'subjects'	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4. I append a letter of agreement from an external institution or organisation agreeing to host the study.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5. I agree to comply with NCI's Information/Data Retention Policy.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
6. I have appended a) study/project information sheet, b) consent form/assent form, a note on proposed utility of the study.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
7. I have provided details of how non-anonymised information will be stored, in a safe and encrypted manner.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
8. I have included my contact details and those of my supervisor (where appropriate). I have only included my NCI email address and not included any personal contact information.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
9. I have given sufficient details on the proposed study/project design, methodology, and data collection procedures, to allow a full ethical review, and I understand that my failure to give sufficient detail may result in a resubmission being required.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10. I understand that if I make changes to my study/project following ethical approval, it is my responsibility to seek an ethics amendment if the change merits ethical consideration.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

National College of Ireland
Educational Research/Study Ethical Review Application Form

All parts of the below form must be completed.

Part A: Title of Research/Study Project and Contact Information

Name

Niall Murphy.

Student Number (if applicable)

19128932

Email

X19128932@student.ncirl.ie

Status:

Undergraduate
 Postgraduate
 Staff

Supervisor (if applicable)

Dr. Leo Casey.

Title of Research/study Project

Stakeholders perceptions of the change in Assessment strategy for the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme due to the impact of Covid-19.

Have you read the NCI Educational Research Ethical Guidelines for Research?

Yes
 No

Please indicate any other ethical guidelines or codes of conduct you have consulted

N/A

Has this research proposal been submitted to any other research ethics committee?

Yes
 No

If yes please provide details, and the outcomes of this process, if applicable:

Is this research proposal supported by any form of research funding?

Yes
No

If yes, please provide details, and indicate whether any restrictions exist on the freedom of the researcher to publish the results:

Part B: Research/Study Proposal

Briefly outline the following information (not more than 200 words in any section).

Proposed starting date and duration of research/study project

March 2021 through to September 2021

The rationale for the project

To investigate and understand the possible impact on the key stakeholders for the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme of a necessary change in assessment strategy in response to Covid-19. There exists very little research into the possible impact of a change in assessment.

The research/study aims and objectives

The aim of this research is to understand the key stakeholders experience of the change in assessment strategy for the NCCAP due to Covid-19.

The objectives of the research are:

- Collate data through semi-structured interviews with the key stakeholders for the NCCAP.
- Identify key themes through extraction of the data through appropriate software.
- Highlight the experience of the stakeholder's of the alternative assessment strategy.
- Draw a conclusion and make recommendation.

The research/study design

This research is a phenomenological qualitative study. This will take the form of semi-structured interviews of the key stakeholders for the NCCAP. All participation will be voluntary.

The methods of analysis. Give details here of the analytic process (e.g. thematic analysis planned if qualitative, statistical procedures planned if quantitative. It is not sufficient to name the software to be used).

The semi-structured interviews will be analysed to identify emerging themes. This will be achieved through transcribing the interviews from audio and then unloaded into NVivo. The analysis will identify the main points the participants are making, highlight any surprising perspectives, how their views differ and what are the points of commonality.

Research Study/project Procedure

Please give as detailed an account as possible of a participant's likely experience in engaging with the project, from the point of first learning about the study, to study completion. State how long project participation is likely to take what is involved. Please attach all questionnaires, interview schedules, scales, surveys, and demographic questions, etc. in the Appendix.

A database of potential participants will be created. The potential participants will be made aware of the study through the NCCAP and will be invited to participate. Once an expression of interest is received the participants will receive an information sheet and a short video introduction to the research itself and what this will involve. Once they have made the decision to participate, they will receive a consent form to sign which will include the appropriate details of the research and also clearly state that they are free to opt out at any stage. The interviews will be approximately 45 minutes to one hour in duration.

Part C: Project Benefits

Please provide some details with regards to research/study/project benefits based on the 8 guiding principles (on page 2)

The research will be guided and underpinned by the eight guiding principles and the benefit will be to add to the academic discussion on the impact to key stakeholders of alternative assessment.

How will the participants be selected, approached and recruited? From where will participants be recruited? If recruiting via an institution or organisation other than NCI please attach a letter of agreement from the host institution agreeing to host the study and circulate recruitment advertisements/email etc.

The participants will be selected and recruited from students who recently completed or are currently participating in the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme in Ireland. These will be recruited through Kerry Educational and Training Board (KETB) who are the governing ETB on the programme.

What inclusion or exclusion criteria will be used?

All the participants will have recently completed or be currently participating in the NCCAP. This will be the only inclusion or exclusion criteria.

How will participants be informed of the nature of the study and participation?

The initial information on the nature of the study will be communicated to the participants

through KETB. Details of the nature of participation will be contained in the information sheet and introductory video.

What procedures will be used to document the research/study participants' consent to participate?

Each participant will be asked to sign a formal consent form. Participants will also be asked at the start of the interview to restate their consent to participate.

Can research/study participants withdraw at any time? If so, how will this be communicated to participants?

Participants may withdraw at any time from participating in this research and this will be clearly stated on both the information sheet, short information video and on the consent form itself.

If vulnerable groups are participating, what special arrangements will be made to deal with issues of informed consent/assent?

It is not anticipated that vulnerable groups will be participating in this research. However, the researcher commits to taking the appropriate steps to protect vulnerable groups should this become evident in the course of the research.

Please include copies of any information letters, debriefing sheets, and consent forms with the application.

Part D: Confidentiality and Information/Data Protection

Please indicate the form in which the Information/Data will be collected.

- Identified Potentially Identifiable De-Identified

What arrangements are in place to ensure that the identity of participants is protected?

In the course of this research, it is not intended to refer at any time to the individual name of the participants nor to their location. However, on the basis that the participants agree to direct quotes each participant will be given an alphabetical reference code.

Will any information about illegal behaviours be collected as part of the research process? If so, detail your consideration of how this information will be treated.

No.

Please indicate any recording devices being used to collect information/data and how it will be used (e.g. audio/video).

Due to current Government restrictions, it is unlikely that the interviews will be held face to face. Therefore, it is anticipated that the interviews will be conducted through appropriate

online audio platforms.

Please describe the procedures for securing specific permission for the use of these recording devices in advance.

The use of recording devices will be contained in the information sheet and also in the consent form. However, at the start of each interview the participants will be asked to restate that they are giving their permission for the interview to be recorded.

Please indicate the form in which the data will be stored.

Identified Potentially Identifiable De-Identified

Who will have responsibility for the information/data generated by the research?

The researcher will have responsibility for this.

Is there a possibility that the information will be archived for secondary data analysis? If so, has this been included in the informed consent process? Also, include information on how and where the information will be stored for secondary analytic purposes.

No.

If not to be stored for secondary data analysis, will the information be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy

Yes.

Dissemination and Reporting

Please describe how the participants will be informed of dissemination and reporting of research/study findings (e.g. submission for examination, reporting, publications, presentations)?

Participants will be informed of dissemination and reporting in the information sheet and will also be included in the consent form.

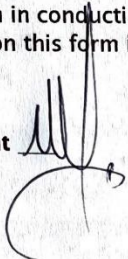
If any dissemination entails the use of audio, video and/or photographic records (including direct quotes), please describe how participants will be informed of this in advance.

Dissemination will not entail the use of audio, video or photographic records. It will however, contain transcripts of the interviews and may contain direct quotes. This will be communicated to the participants in the information sheet and also the consent form.

Part E: Signed Declaration

I confirm that I have read the NCI Educational Research Ethical Guidelines, and agree to abide by them in conducting this research. I also confirm that the information provided on this form is correct (Electronic signature is acceptable).

Signature of Applicant



Date

2/9/21

Signature of Supervisor (where

appropriate): Date _____

Any other information the committee should be aware of?

The semi-structured interviews will be analysed to identify emerging themes. This will be achieved through transcribing the interviews from audio and then unloaded into NVivo. The analysis will identify the main points the participants are making, highlight any surprising perspectives, how their views differ and what are the points of commonality.

Research Study/project Procedure

Please give as detailed an account as possible of a participant's likely experience in engaging with the project, from the point of first learning about the study, to study completion. State how long project participation is likely to take what is involved. Please attach all questionnaires, interview schedules, scales, surveys, and demographic questions, etc. in the Appendix.

A database of potential participants will be created. The potential participants will be made aware of the study through the NCCAP and will be invited to participate. Once an expression of interest is received the participants will receive an information sheet and a short video introduction to the research itself and what this will involve. Once they have made the decision to participate, they will receive a consent form to sign which will include the appropriate details of the research and also clearly state that they are free to opt out at any stage. The interviews will be approximately 45 minutes to one hour in duration.

Part C: Project Benefits

Please provide some details with regards to research/study/project benefits based on the 8 guiding principles (on page 2)

The research will be guided and underpinned by the eight guiding principles and the benefit will be to add to the academic discussion on the impact to key stakeholders of alternative assessment.

How will the participants be selected, approached and recruited? From where will participants be recruited? If recruiting via an institution or organisation other than NCI please attach a letter of agreement from the host institution agreeing to host the study and circulate recruitment advertisements/email etc.

The participants will be selected and recruited from students who recently completed or are currently participating in the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme in Ireland. These will be recruited through Kerry Educational and Training Board (KETB) who are the governing ETB on the programme.

What inclusion or exclusion criteria will be used?

All the participants will have recently completed or be currently participating in the NCCAP. This will be the only inclusion or exclusion criteria.

How will participants be informed of the nature of the study and participation?

The initial information on the nature of the study will be communicated to the participants

Appendix E: Participation Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Who is doing the research?

My name is Niall Murphy and I am a student at NCI. My supervisor is Dr. Leo Casey.

What is the research about?

This research is an investigation into the lived experience of the change in assessment strategy for the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme (NCCAP)

Why have I been asked?

You have been invited to participate in this study as you have indicated your desire to be involved. Further, you have also been invited as you have recently completed or are in the process of completing the NCCAP and as such have suitable experience to contribute to this research. Your contact details were obtained from Kerry Educational and Training Board.

If I say yes, what will be involved?

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to take part in an interview with me online, through an appropriate online platform. This interview will take approximately forty five to sixty minutes of your time and will be audio recorded.

Are there any risks/inconvenience.

There are no risks should you decide to take part in this research and the only inconvenience will be one hour of your time.

Do I get paid for participation?

No, unfortunately there will not be any payment for your time.

Appendix F: Participant Consent Form

INTERVIEWS

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, Niall Murphy, student at National College of Ireland, am conducting research into the experience of the change in assessment strategy for the National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme due to Covid-19.

Individual interviews are being held around Ireland. In these interviews I will hear from people about their lived experiences of this change in strategy.

Individual interviews will take approximately 45–60 minutes. The information you provide will be used for research purposes only. An audio recording may be made with your consent for internal use to ensure the accuracy of my notes and assist with research analysis.

Your information will be stored securely, and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential. Study findings may be published, but you will not be individually identifiable in these publications.

This inquiry has received ethics approval from the National College of Ireland. A copy of the Participant Information Statement, which contains more detailed information about this research, will be provided along with this consent form and is available upon request.

If you are happy to take part in this research, please write your name in the space below, sign your name at the bottom of the next page and put the date at the bottom of the next page.

You should only say 'yes' to taking part in this research if you know what it is about and you wish to be involved.

I, _____ [PRINT NAME], am
happy to be in this research inquiry.

In saying yes to taking part in this research, I am saying that:

- I understand what the research is about.
- I understand what I will be asked to do.

Do I have to say yes?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part.

What will happen if I say no?

If you decide not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher, with NCI or the ETB. If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting me directly.

If you withdraw from the study your interview will be destroyed; the recording will be erased and the transcripts will be destroyed.

Confidentiality.

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using personal information about you for the research project. All this information will be treated confidentially. Your information will only be used for the purpose of this research project.

I plan to discuss/publish the results through NCI as part of my dissertation. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified.

What if I have concerns or a complaint?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact me.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Appendix F: Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me what you thought of the original pen and paper in-class theoretical exam at the end of the modules for the N.C.C.A.P?
2. How appropriate do you think these assessments were?
3. Were you concerned when it was announced that there would be a change in the assessment method?
4. How did you feel when it was announced that the assessment would change to a take home exam?
5. How well prepared were you to engage with the changed assessment method?
6. How did you find completing the assessment process?
7. What did you like about the take home exam?
8. What did you dislike about it?
9. Do you think the changed assessment method provided the same opportunity as the pen and paper assessment to score?
10. Having lived through the change in assessment method, which assessment method would you prefer?
11. Can you explain why you think that?
12. What did you think when KETB reverted to the traditional pen and paper in class assessment after lockdown?
13. Can you explain why you think that?
14. Is there anything further you would like to say about the changed assessment method that we haven't covered?