

*ENABLING TRANSITIONS: Insights from Learners' Transitional Experiences on a*

*Further to Higher Education Bridging Programme*

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MA in Learning and Teaching

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### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this research to the memory of my father Francie and my mother Mary Kate who, although having to leave school at 14 to look after her siblings, always had a love of education which she passed on to me.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank the following for their help and support throughout the research and writing of this dissertation:

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the transitional experiences of a group of learners on a unique bridging programme between an FE and a HE college, the 'NAVET programme'. Three main themes emerged from the literature review which framed the three sub-questions: (i) How learners perceive the bridging programme as enabling their successful transition to HE? (ii) What practices contribute to or take from a sense of belonging for learners in the colleges? (iii) How the bridging programme facilitates the development of a learner identity?

A qualitative methodology was employed to ensure the 'voices' of participants were heard using semi-structured interviews. The research is framed by a socio-cultural Community of Practice framework for understanding transitioning in education. Transition involves becoming a member of a community, learning and making sense of the practices and developing a new identity for belonging to that community.

The findings suggest that all participants valued the support provided in FE and felt it provided them with the 'foundation' for HE and a better understanding of what was expected in university. While all participants felt a sense of belonging to the FE college there was mixed responses in relation to 'belonging' in HE. In general, all participants felt more confident, having developed a variety of academic skills and were better prepared for tertiary education which suggests a more positive learner identity.

There were significant differences between the transitional experiences for the mature learners and the school leavers including: the effect of being labelled 'level 5 learners' in the HE college; recognising the need for support in HE and the confidence and determination at the end of the programme to continue in HE.

The findings of this research are an accurate representation of the experiences of these nine participants. They may not be representative of all learners on bridging programmes.

*Keywords:* further education/FE, higher education/HE, bridging, access, foundation, widening participation, transition/al, belonging, learner identity, community of practice (CoP).

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## Chapter 1- Background and Context

### 1.1 Introduction

This research aims to explore the experiences of a group of learners on a bridging programme between a further education (FE) and higher education (HE) college. The objective is to examine if this programme enables a successful transition to higher education for learners.

The focus of this study is the Foundation Programme in Education and Training (aka Non-Award Visitor (Education and Training) or NAVET) also informally known as a bridging programme. For the purposes of this research it will be identified as the ‘NAVET programme’. It is considered a bridging programme because, on a weekly basis, learners attend subject specific lectures in the university and also attend the FE college.

I was introduced to this programme three years ago when asked to teach on the course. This programme allows learners attend an FE college and study a full level 5 (EQF 4) Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)<sup>1</sup> award. Simultaneously they study at a 3<sup>rd</sup> level neighbouring university, becoming undergraduates one day a week, and completing two modules leading to a level 8 (EQF 6) degree. Upon successful completion of the level 5 course and having passed the two level 8 modules, they have direct access to the level 8 BSc in Education with exemptions in the two modules. It also opens other pathways into teaching at all levels in the Irish education system.

As a teacher in the FE college I have benefitted from hearing about the learners’ experiences in both colleges. I have listened as they discuss with anticipation their first

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<sup>1</sup> QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland.

day in the university, the first visit to the library or the first lecture. I have experienced their delight at getting a university student card, being able to join societies or use the gym, alongside their disappointment and in some cases feelings of exclusion because of their labelling as NAVETs. I have seen how some struggle more than others; where some do not tell their friends they are studying in an FE college, preferring to say they are in university; and where some win awards for public speaking or creative writing, something they would never have previously attempted.

The rationale for this study is to examine this type of ‘bridging’ programme between FE and HE to understand the ‘transitions’ for the learners, some of whom have been away from education for a while. The aim is to explore their experiences, both at FE and at HE level, to investigate what works, what are the positives and negatives for this type of bridging programme and what are the aspects which need further attention. These insights may guide practitioners working on the programme (including the researcher) to develop practices to better support learners’ transitioning between FE and HE colleges. The findings of this research will contribute to the body of research in the areas of access/bridging programmes and further the design and development of similar access programmes within the FE/HE sector.

## **1.2 Background and Context**

### **Higher Education in Ireland.**

There are 39 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland which serve over 225,000 students, approximately 43,000 of which are new entrants. The majority of these new entrants are aged 18/19 coming directly from the Leaving Certificate which is the typical matriculation route into HE (HEA, 2018a). The balance is made up of students

who are entering HE via the non-typical routes initiated as part of the widening participation strategy.

### **Widening Participation.**

The issue of widening participation (WP) to higher education has been on the agenda in Ireland for many years. The 1995 White Paper ‘Charting our Educational Future’ was one of the first government policies that advocated for Irish universities to develop a plan and set targets for improving equity of access to education.

The Higher Education Authority, in consultation with third level institutions, will be asked to advise on the most appropriate and effective means of achieving an annual increase in participation of 500 students from lower socio-economic groups in third level education over the next five years. (DES, 1995)

The same key idea is behind the most recent National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (NAP) that access to HE should be something every citizen can experience. This report compares the average participation rates for all counties in Ireland. For example, in County Dublin the average participation rate is 47% compared to 60% in County Galway. Areas such as Dublin 6 and Dublin 4 have 99% and 84% participation respectively, while other areas such as Dublin 11 and Dublin 8 have only 28% participation rates (HEA, 2015, p. 44). This shows that while there are a variety of levels of participation throughout Ireland, some areas are still falling behind.

The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 also identified the need for greater diversity of opportunity in learning beyond school to support an increase in lifelong learning. The report emphasised the need to prepare learners of all ages and abilities to participate and succeed in education. It has set a target of 10% for Ireland’s lifelong

learning participation rate by 2020 and to 15% by 2025<sup>2</sup> (DES, 2016, p. 39). Lifelong learning is defined as including all types of learning activities, formal, non-formal or informal, which is carried out on a continuous basis to improve “knowledge, skills and competence” (Eurostat, 2018).

National initiatives such as the introduction of the HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) and DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) programmes, has increased participation for targeted groups by over 170% in the total number of eligible recipients from 2010 -2017 (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018, p. 4).

### **Access-Foundation-Bridging Programmes.**

Irish universities provide a diverse range of access or foundation programmes aimed at marginalised groups in society that are under-represented in third level. These groups include those from low socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minorities and mature learners. These programmes aim to increase equity in access and improve retention and performance within tertiary educational settings (Curtis, et al., 2016).

Murphy (2009) differentiates access programmes as “intended to facilitate learners to commence on a course of continuing education having received recognition for knowledge, skills or competence required” while foundation programmes are generally considered as giving “a ‘foundation’ in a subject that enables the learner to go on to further study in that subject area” (p. 30).

Bridging programmes are a model of access or foundation programme and are generally defined as a university preparation course that focuses on academic skills as a

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<sup>2</sup> Participation in lifelong learning is calculated as the percentage of persons who received education or training in the past four weeks (DES, 2016).



means of preparing for the challenges of HE (York University, n.d.). The NAVET programme is an example of a college-led collaboration between an FE and a HE college which seeks to provide learners with the key skills and ‘bridges’ the gap between the two colleges.

### **Further Education.**

Further education is offered as an alternative access route to HE – the ‘back door’ is a term commonly used (the front door being the more direct Leaving Certificate route through the CAO points system (CAO, 2019a)). However, the benefits of FE are well documented; it gives the younger post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) student a chance to mature, to experience a college that is not a school but retains some of the supports and teaching styles while also leading to more independent, autonomous learning. Learners get a chance to study non-school subjects such as law, digital marketing or social studies which helps to inform their decision for third level. The same can be said for mature learners providing a ‘second chance’ and supportive environment to act as a springboard into higher education or into employment (McGuinness, et al., 2018).

Recent statistics indicate that over 339,000 learners are undertaking 22,000 courses in further education and training (FET) delivered through Education and Training Boards (ETBs) (Education Matters, 2018, p. 271). The NAP (2015-2019) identified targets for increased participation in HE for marginalised groups including those with FE qualifications (currently 6.6%, target 10%) by 2019 (HEA, 2015, p. 36). This is an increase of approximately 2000 learners over five years progressing to HE based on their FE results (Education Matters, 2018, p. 276). This means that FE colleges are now

considered a viable route for access to tertiary education and provide equity of access for those that may not otherwise attend.

The 2018 progress review of the NAP identified the development of access and foundation courses by HEIs, to be delivered through FE colleges, as a key way of improving access for FE learners (p. 29). The NAVET programme is an example of an access course that supports this plan and could be used as a model for this initiative.

### **NAVET Programme.**

Although there are a variety of access programmes available in universities and colleges around Ireland, the NAVET programme is a unique widening participation model. The learner has the advantage of completing a QQI level 5 in the familiar environment of a community-based FE college, while also getting the chance to experience 3rd level university life. A recent report in Education Matters (2018) identified the social implications and benefits of participating in community-based education which included easy physical access, low travel times and lower costs. This course gives the learners involved a chance to experience university life without the cost implications of 3<sup>rd</sup> level and may provide support to enable their success.

An ESRI (2014) study showed that 45% of students who dropped out of college identified the biggest factor for doing so was because the course was not what they expected (McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014). A report by FET2HE (2016) identified “persistence, maturity and an informed decision” as key features of a successful progression from FE to HE (p. 15). This model of ‘bridging programme’ allows learners experience a level 8 degree course in their chosen field of study, to understand what is expected at this level, while progressing through a level 5 programme and most likely

maturing over that year. This provides learners with ‘space’ and time to decide on the best route for them.

Learners on the programme come from a variety of backgrounds including urban, rural and DEIS<sup>3</sup> schools. Some are early school leavers and/or mature learners while some have just finished their Leaving Certificate (LC) and struggled to get the required points for their chosen course. Other under-represented groups such as lone parents and first generation to enter this level of education have also been participants on the course (Whitehall College, 2019a).

People from ethnic minority groups, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and males are under-represented in initial teacher training (ITE) in Ireland (Conway, Murphy, Rath, & Hall, 2009; Heinz, 2013). The majority of the student teachers in Heinz’s study had the same “educational experiences” at second-level (p. 139). Developing ‘flexible pathways’ into teacher training is seen as one way of diversifying the teaching profession to reflect the Irish population (Conway et al., 2009).

This bridging programme is open to a mixed cohort of learners and allows graduates to progress to a level 8 degree in education. The degree is a three-year programme with the option of an extra year for recognition by the Teaching Council to teach in FE. Alternatively, it is possible for those graduating from this degree to enter a Masters in Education, which would qualify them as primary school teachers. They can also apply, through the Central Applications Office (CAO), for several other education related degrees for post primary teaching (CAO, 2019b). This bridging programme aims to

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<sup>3</sup> DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools - the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, was launched in May 2005 and remains the Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage.

diversify the teaching profession by providing access to a career that may otherwise be unattainable for the learners involved.

There is limited research done on these types of access programmes in Ireland and to my knowledge there has been no prior qualitative research carried out on this programme. This study will focus on the NAVET programme and investigate the following central research statement:

Enabling Transitions: Insights from Learners' Transitional Experiences on a Further to Higher Education Bridging Programme

The statement is divided into three specific sub-questions: (i) How do learners perceive the bridging programme as enabling their successful transition to HE? (ii) What practices contribute to or take from a sense of belonging for learners in the colleges? (iii) How the bridging programme facilitates the development of a revised learner identity?

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to understand the transitional experiences of learners on a FE to HE bridging programme, the NAVET programme. Before discussing the key concepts and theoretical base in relation to transitioning it is important to put this research concern into context. The first part of this review provides a brief outline of the Irish education system and the typical progression route to HE. It examines some of the key legislation and government policies which have initiated changes that have furthered the widening participation agenda in relation to underrepresented groups in HE. These policies provide the basis for some of the non-typical student progression routes to HE. This will help situate the NAVET programme in the Irish educational landscape.

Part two of the literature review charts concepts already established as central elements of ‘transitioning’ through the formal education process. Key concepts such as; practices that support transition, a ‘sense of belonging’ and learner identity are discussed.

### **2.2 Education in Ireland**

Education is compulsory in Ireland from the age of six to sixteen (junior cycle) (DES, n.d.). However, approximately 86.5% of students continue in secondary school and complete the senior cycle by sitting the Leaving Certificate (LC) (OECD, 2017). The LC is considered the standard matriculation examination for entering HE.

Further Education and Training (FET) is typically categorised as the “organised provision of educational opportunities outside the formal primary, second level and higher education sectors”. For the majority of FE learners, it occurs after second level schooling, but it is not part of the HE system (Murray, Grummell, & Ryan, 2014, p. 1). Although FET

has been around in different guises for a very long time, having ‘roots’ in the British administration from 1900, it is only since the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 that clear progression paths to HE were made available to learners (ibid., p. 45).

Higher education in Ireland consists of universities, institutes of technology (IoTs) and colleges of education, along with some private colleges (Euroguidance Ireland, 2019). Over the last five years the number of full-time new entrants to undergraduate HE has increased by 5% and now exceeds 43,000 learners. This reflects the continuing demand for access to HE in Ireland (HEA, 2018a). Approximately 75% of those undergraduates gain access through the typical matriculation route, the Leaving Certificate while the other 25% progress through non-typical routes such as FE and access programmes (Denny, 2015) similar to the NAVET programme.

### **2.3 Pathways to Higher Education**

#### **Typical progression route.**

The typical progression route is for students to enter HE after completing the senior cycle exams, the Leaving Certificate. These students are considered ‘traditional undergraduates’ and share common characteristics: usually 18 or 19, from middle class backgrounds, have no disabilities, can study full-time with minimal external responsibilities and generally English is their first language (TCD, 2018).

Around 75% of places at HEIs in Ireland were allocated through the Central Applications Office (CAO) points system which is based on the academic performance of the student in the LC (Denny, 2015, p. 14). The CAO system allocates a set number of points to each score obtained dependent on whether the exam was sat at honours, pass or foundation level. The maximum number of points achievable is 625 (CAO, 2019a).

The CAO system is based on supply and demand with the points for some courses increasing each year as the demand rises. Similarly, when a course is no longer in demand the points required tends to fall. Some courses have specific matriculation requirements and courses in the IoTs generally require fewer points dependent on the course.

### **Non-typical progression routes.**

The White Paper ‘Charting our Educational Future’ was one of the first policies that encouraged the universities to develop new progression routes and set targets for widening participation to “promote equality of access, participation and benefit for all in accordance with their needs and abilities” (DES, 1995). Non-typical progression routes are usually associated with the ‘non-traditional undergraduates’ who are generally categorised as access students, mature students, students with disabilities, international students, travellers and students with external commitments such as parents/carers (TCD, 2018). In other words, those that did not follow the typical progression route through the CAO.

The more recent NAP (2015-2019) has targeted six key groups currently underrepresented in HE who may also be considered ‘non-traditional’. These include those from socio-economic groups with low participation in HE, part-time/flexible students and FE award holders (p. 38).

### ***HEAR, DARE and SUSI initiatives.***

In order to meet the targets set out by the White Paper, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) established the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) programme which was aimed at school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is administered by the CAO to help students who may not traditionally go to HE and allocates places based on reduced LC points (HEAR, 2019).

Following on from the Disability Act (2005) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004), DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) was introduced (Byrne, Doris, Sweetman, & Casey, 2013). It offers an alternative route for accessing HE for school-leavers who have disabilities and can show that this had a negative impact on their 2<sup>nd</sup> level education. Places are offered through the CAO based on reduced LC points once they have been screened by the appropriate professional to confirm their disability. According to a study by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum for T&L) approximately 5% of places at HEIs are students who access the HEAR and DARE schemes (Denny, 2015, p. 15).

Acknowledging that access to education is key in promoting equality, the government also established SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) in 2012 to centralise the provision of financial support for learners. It was seen as “a significant mechanism of support for equity of access to higher education” (Centre for Effective Services, 2015, p. 4). SUSI offers funding to eligible students based on means tested criteria in approved full-time third-level education for both school leavers and mature students (SUSI, 2019). In the 2017/2018 academic year, SUSI awarded funding to approximately 80,000 students (SUSI, 2018).

FE courses, including the NAVET programme, are eligible for SUSI grants (SUSI, 2019) and FE students can apply for both the HEAR and DARE routes through the CAO (HEA, 2015).



***Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) – Further Education and Training (FET).***

In 1985 the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Programme was introduced. It comes under the umbrella of FET which is targeted at “those sectors of the population who are otherwise poorly served by mainstream education” (Murray, Grummell, & Ryan, 2014, p. 1). In 2015-2016 there were over 32,000 learners enrolled in PLC courses making it the largest component of full-time FET courses in Ireland (McGuinness, et al., 2018).

The introduction of the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs) in 1996, facilitated the allocation of places in Institutes of Technologies (IoTs) on ‘selected’ courses based on achieving a full FET award. However, it was not until the 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act that certification was standardised under the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) bodies. This provided clear progression paths for FET learners and ‘widened’ the door into HE (Murray, Grummell, & Ryan, 2014).

The Common Awards System (CAS) in 2014 expanded this process by standardising the FET/QQI awards to the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) Levels 1 to 6 (QQI, 2014). Most universities now have a reserved quota with links from specific FET courses while the IOTs generally do not differentiate between CAS candidates and LC candidates (QQI, 2016).

Access to FE colleges is determined in several ways dependent on the choice of course. For most courses there is a minimum entry requirement. Applications are also welcome from mature students or those with ‘equivalence’ in terms of employment or appropriate prior learning. A minimum level of English is also a requirement on most

courses and all applications are subject to interview before places are confirmed (Whitehall College, 2019a).

FE is also considered a ‘second chance at education’ for some. FE colleges facilitate a significant number of adults and non-traditional students who use this opportunity to gain a new experience of education and to possibly climb the ladder to the next rung in education or employment (McGuinness, et al., 2018). While historically FE courses are considered vocational and for the most part are geared towards entering the workforce there is also the social implications of participating in education to create “confident and engaged citizens” (Rocks & Lavender, 2018).

***Access-Foundation-Bridging programmes.***

Even before the 1995 White Paper on Education, and since this, and supported by other government policies such as NAP (2015-2019), several colleges introduced measures to improve access and widen participation to promote the inclusion of ‘non-traditional’ learners. The Higher Education Access/Foundation Courses Report (2009) identified 37 different access/foundation programmes available across Ireland being delivered in universities, colleges of education and IoTs. Most of these programmes targeted marginalised groups in society; travellers, ethnic minorities and mature learners generally known as ‘non-traditional’ learners (p. 32).

Although this report is ten years old it shows how successful these access/foundation programmes can be in increasing participation. On programmes where complete progression data was available, there was 80% completion of the foundation course and 62% progression to HE (Murphy, 2009). Other research show that students who complete a foundation programme do as well as direct entry students in first year

(Sanders & Daly, 2013; HEA, 2013) and that retention and graduation rates is similar to that of direct entry students (Share & Carroll, 2013).

Currently, all seven universities in Ireland run access or foundation programmes for underrepresented groups (O’Sullivan, Byrne, Robson, & Winters, 2019). In some of these programmes, graduates are guaranteed direct entry into specific degree programmes or they are eligible to compete for places in specific programmes in the associated HE college. According to the HEA (2018a) there were 445 students enrolled full-time in access/foundation programmes as undergraduates during the 2016/17 academic year (p. 8).

The **Trinity Access Programme (TAP)**, set up in 1993, is an early example of an access/foundation programme aimed at ensuring “a significant increase in participation at third-level of those who for social, economic, and educational reasons have not yet realised their full educational potential” (TCD, 2013, p. 5). TAP offers a Young Adults (under 21 – FE based) and a Mature Student (over 23 – HE based) Foundation Course for students from schools affiliated to TAP or DEIS schools in Dublin. They must meet the same socio-economic criteria as required for HEAR or in the case of mature students come from socio-economic backgrounds under-represented in third level education (TCD, 2019). Both courses cover key skills such as study skills, educational guidance and ICT and the students can choose from a selection of other subjects. The Mature Student Foundation Course provides students with full access to the supports and services provided by the college and additional TAP student supports. Graduates from this course are eligible to compete for places on a range of undergraduate programmes. A recent report published by Trinity showed a 14% increase in the participation rates of students from underrepresented groups, from 5% in 2001 to 19% in 2012 (TCD, 2013).

There are however significant differences between the TAP programmes and the NAVET programme, the subject of this study. The NAVET programme is characterised by: (i) being both FE and HE based where learners are studying in both colleges simultaneously, (ii) open to all learners with few restrictions and (iii) guarantees a place on the level 8 BSc in Education programme upon graduation.

#### **2.4 Widening Participation - Where are we now?**

Participation in HE by school leavers has risen steadily from approximately 20% in 1980, 44% in 1998 and to 52% in 2011 (HEA, 2015, p. 14). The National Forum for T&L report revealed that 75% of places at HEIs in Ireland are based on CAO points achieved, 20% are based on mature students or those that have completed FE courses with the remaining 5% contributed to HEAR/DARE applicants (Denny, 2015, p. 14).

The NAP (2015-2019) report showed that participation and educational achievement in HE has improved for all groups including those from low socio-economic backgrounds and those with a disability (p. 14). The progress review report of NAP shows that although targets have still not been met there has been substantial improvements in equity of access since the original estimates. Rates for students from DEIS schools increased by 1.5% and the rates for students from FE colleges has increased by 1.3% (HEA, 2018b).

The PATH initiative, as part of the National Access Plan, is the most recent government policy to encourage widening participation among all areas of the population. It identified five main goals to increase participation which included the development of access and foundation courses by HEIs, to be delivered through FE colleges, to help support access to higher education (HEA, 2015, pp. 25-30). The NAVET programme is an

example of a course that activates and supports this initiative and seeks to support learners' transition to HE.

## **2.5 Summary**

While a lot of work has been done to address educational inequality over the last thirty years much more needs to be done for those groups who are persistently marginalised. The issue of widening participation has proven to be more complex than was originally realised by many people in the sector. While national initiatives such as HEAR, DARE and SUSI provide a service there is some criticism as to whether they are fulfilling their role (Byrne et al., 2013). Other initiatives such as TAP seem to work. However, these are individual college-led programmes and although encouraged and funded by the government, there is still no 'joined up' national level initiative that administers these as a non-typical progression route. Therefore, the issue of widening participation remains on the political and educational agenda.

So far, this literature review has focused on outlining the traditional and alternative pathways to HE and the government's initiatives in relation to widening participation and equity of access to education both historical and current. It has also identified some of the impacts these initiatives have made to improve access for marginalised groups and the challenges that still need to be addressed.

This next section of the review will focus on analysing the Irish and international literature available in relation to transitioning and present the underpinning concepts which are most relevant to this research topic. It will investigate how the development of these concepts may inform practitioners and enable a successful transition for learners.

## 2.6 Enabling Transitions to Higher Education

According to the dictionary enabling means to ‘provide with the means or opportunity’ and transition refers to the change ‘from one state, stage, subject, or place to another’ (Merriam Webster, 2018) .

This research will be framed by a socio-cultural perspective for understanding transition in education. Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice (CoPs) identifies learning as encompassed by community, practice, meaning and identity. Wenger suggests that by participating in a community, interacting with members and learning their practices, the participant becomes a competent member of that community, which shapes their identity and gives them a sense of belonging to the community. Transition under a ‘Community of Practice’ framework therefore involves becoming a member of a community, learning and making sense of the practices and developing a new identity for belonging to that community (Crafter & Maunder, 2012).

Learners on the NAVET programme participate in two different communities; the FE community and the HE community. They are considered ‘legitimate peripheral participants’ in both communities (Wenger, 1998). In the FE community they complete a full QQI level 5 course and engage with the practices of that community every day. Over the course of the programme they aim to leave the periphery of the FE community and become full participants. In the HE community they are still considered ‘legitimate’ because they are registered students on the course and are studying two modules at that level. They are also on the periphery of this community and may in time become full members. This study aims to discover the practices on the NAVET programme that supports their transition and participation in this community.

**Transitioning.**

Transitions are life changes that involve the person redefining themselves and deciding how they feel about the new world they are inhabiting; about the new relationships they are forming and their abilities within that world. When students start college, they leave behind the role of ‘pupils’ answering to teachers and become instead ‘students’ or independent learners who form new relationships both with a new range of college peers and with faculty staff (Huon & Sankey, 2002). Fleming and Finnegan (2011) identify higher education as ‘a transitional space’ where students pass through from undergraduate to graduate and get an opportunity for ‘self-improvement and change’ (p. 14).

Briggs, Clarke and Hall (2012) suggest that transition involves the creation of a new learner identity as a university student while Hussey and Smith (2010) define transition as “a significant change in a student’s life, self-concept and learning”. They emphasize the role of the educational institute in facilitating ‘desirable transitions’ (p.156). They suggest transition involves five major elements: social and cultural integration in university life; the student’s self-concept or understanding of themselves; knowledge, understanding and skills; autonomy; and learning approaches.

Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McClune (2008) see transition as a process that can involve a sense of “alienation and exclusion, as well as of excitement and exhilaration” (p. 1). They argue that understanding how students learn, including their integration within the college and the development of their learner identity as students, is key for ensuring a positive learning environment and a successful transition.

Tett, Cree and Christie's (2017) longitudinal study suggest that transition is not 'a one-off event' but rather an 'on-going process' with critical moments throughout the process. The initial 'key moment' was the transition to university and the loss of a sense of belonging after leaving further education. The process of learning to fit in which involved social relationships with peers, managing their academic workload and asking for support when they needed it helped the students transition into university students by the end of the first year in college. The third transition did not happen until their final years where they started to become 'part of the community', felt comfortable in the learning environment and had become independent learners (pp. 389-402).

Based on the above research this review will examine the process of transitioning under three main themes. Firstly, the review will examine the practices that facilitate the learner to become a legitimate member of the college community and in doing so successfully transition to higher education. It will then focus on social and cultural integration – how learners participate and develop a 'sense of belonging' to the university. Finally, it will examine the theme of learner identity – how students perceive themselves as learners and the importance of a positive learner identity in the context of learning. The three themes are interrelated and reflect Wenger's CoP framework for analysing transitions, as suggested by Crafter and Maunder (2012).

### **Practices - Enabling a successful transition.**

Learning, according to Wenger (2010), is not just about knowledge and acquiring the necessary skills, it is about becoming a 'knower' within the community and understanding what is expected by the community (p. 181). To become a 'knower', students entering university must get the appropriate level of support to help them acquire



the relevant knowledge and develop the necessary skills which in turn supports the development of a positive learner identity (Rocks & Lavender, 2018).

Briggs et al. (2012) emphasise the importance of support “on both sides of the transition bridge” to help students adjust to university life and to develop their student identity and autonomy. They suggest that making connections, while still in school, such as attending open days, residential summer schools and talking with current students help them imagine themselves becoming students in the future. Once they start university social interactions and support such as peer and staff interaction, induction sessions and continuous guidance opportunities are some of the things that can encourage the development of a learner identity (p. 4).

Briggs et al. (2012) propose that a positive learner identity is critical to student success and this can be achieved when schools, colleges and universities collaborate and implement ‘integrated systems’ which will enable the successful transition from secondary to tertiary education. Similarly, Fleming (2010) advocates institutional involvement for “creating, supporting and sustaining communities of learners” as an intervention which will support the learner and increase retention (p. 5). Wenger, McDermott and Synder (2002) suggest that communities should ‘build benches’ by designing activities that let all participants feel like ‘full members’ which keeps ‘peripheral’ members such as new students engaged (p. 4). This argument is re-iterated by Hussey and Smith (2010) who see students transitions as integral to their education and the college should facilitate these transitions by placing them in the centre of the educational experience.

Different studies (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2008) have identified the different styles of teaching, learning and assessment that are used in HE as

one of the biggest challenges for all students as they transition. The National Forum for T&L (2016) carried out a study which examined the transition from second level and FE to HE. It found that FE prepares learners better with different practices such as group work and presentation skills which enables the learner to develop as independent learners.

Hultberg, Plos, Hendry and Kjellgren (2009) found that courses which included a good foundation for understanding the different demands of the programme aided the students' transition. Other studies also identified lack of knowledge about the course content and the college (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and unrealistic expectations about workload (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011) were reasons why transition may not succeed.

MacFarlane (2018) identifies positive communication with both peers and academic staff and being trusted to work independently as practices that help students to successfully transition to HE. She identifies how learners develop "confidence, independence and motivation" when involved in an immersion programme in HE which in turn 'nurtures' their learner identity. She argues for a more "immersive model of transition" to allow time for the school 'pupil' to develop a 'student' learner identity and a sense of belonging to the university (p. 4).

MacFarlane's immersive model of transition is similar to the NAVET programme in that learners have full access to the college's facilities, attend lectures and have college student cards while still attending the FE college.

### **Social and cultural integration - A 'sense of belonging'.**

Wenger (1998) emphasises the importance of social participation in the chosen community for learning to occur. He suggests that participation "shapes not only what we

do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (p. 4). Becoming a full participant involves recognizing and interpreting a range of practices and actions embedded in the chosen field of study. This helps foster a ‘sense of belonging’ to the community of peers in their field of study. Rather than thinking of themselves as someone who is studying engineering or philosophy, they see themselves as engineers and philosophers (Hussey & Smith, 2010).

The importance of a sense of belonging is echoed in several studies (Briggs et al, 2012; Harvey, Drew, and Smith, 2006) as an “aid in social and emotional adjustment” (ibid., p. 18). Macfarlane (2018) studied a group of disadvantaged school pupils who took part in a widening participation programme in an elite university. The participants expressed increased confidence after participating in the immersive programme at HE which aided their self-efficacy and increased their sense of belonging in university. The feeling of ‘belonging’ to the university was created by having full access to facilities, not having a uniform and having a university student card. Students identified the programme as a ‘bridge’ to university life which was aided by their sense of belonging, new relationships and friend networks that had developed over the year long programme (p. 19). Thomas (2012) identifies the development of “meaningful interactions between staff and students” alongside “peer relations” and “relevant HE experiences” as key to nurturing a sense of belonging to the HE environment (p. 12-15).

Social integration was also identified as an important factor for successful transition in first year (Huon & Sankey, 2002; Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Palmer et al. (2009) reported the importance of ‘friendship networks’ and feeling a ‘sense of belonging’ as key factors to enable a successful transition (p.39). Hultberg et

al.'s, (2009) study emphasised working in groups and with a diverse range of learners from different backgrounds as important for both academic and social integration in first year (p. 55). Fleming (2010) found the key concern for Irish students was having friends, understanding who they were in this new learning environment and “who is going to be my ally in the new learning and developmental trajectory?”. A later study by Fleming and Finnegan (2011) found that non-traditional learners identified “emotional, social and academic support” as an important reason for success (p. 8). They suggest that recognition by peers and university staff in the early stages is crucial for creating a positive learner identity.

### **Learner identity - Becoming a university student.**

When a learner leaves secondary school usually after five or six years, they are well versed in the practices in the school, know exactly what is expected of them and are comfortable doing any tasks within the school. They leave as experienced school students. However, as they move to HE their role changes as they are the ‘freshers’, the new kids on the block. As ‘freshers’ they have no experience of their new role, they do not know what to do and they have to start all over again to become part of their new community and reconstruct their identity (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2005).

In the transition from secondary to tertiary education students are joining new communities and are ‘legitimate peripheral participants’ within that community (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2005). Within a CoP framework Wenger (1998) suggests that identity is temporal and is defined by different trajectories. For example, an inbound trajectory suggests a ‘goal of full participation’ (p. 155). The trajectory of each individual student incorporates the “memories, competencies, key formative events, stories, and relationships

to people and places” and will influence how they participate and how they learn (Wenger, 2010, p. 183). The new practices to be learned can also influence the learner’s trajectory such as feeling excluded (negative influence) or passing an exam (positive influence) (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

Briggs et al., (2012) suggest that for students to achieve success in HE they need a positive learner identity. This learner identity, or the ways in which the learner thinks of themselves as being a student, their expectations, fears and goals will be influenced by how they imagine their future self (p. 13). Student hood is “betwixt and between two other statuses”, a temporary status where a learner identity is developed (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010, p. 3). Koen, Van Vianen, Klehe and Zikic (2016) identified this as ‘bridging the gap’ between our current to our desired identity or our ‘possible selves’ (p. 660).

Bliuc, Ellis and Goodyear (2011) agree that how “students perceive themselves in the context of learning” and their ‘social identity’ as a university student has an impact on how they learn. A positive student social identity indicates deeper approaches to learning which results in higher academic achievement and a greater sense of belonging (p. 421). Similarly, Huon and Sankey (2002) suggest that students need to “reorganise the way they think about themselves, as learners, and as social beings” and found that a positive learner or student identity contributed substantially to the successful transition for a student (p. 1). They also found that the more the student liked being a student and where they felt university life suited them, the easier the transition. Similarly, MacFarlane (2018) proposes that “immersion in HE whilst still in school facilitates the development of a positive learner identity” and this in turn leads to a successful transition to university.

Hussey and Smith (2010) argue the most important transition for a learner in HE is the change from being a “relative novice into a knowledgeable, skilled participant of a discipline” and as a result becoming an autonomous learner who is able to make their own choices and decisions for learning (p.157).

## **2.7 Conclusion**

The first part of this literature review provided a brief outline of the education system in Ireland and examined the typical and non-typical progression routes for Irish students into HE. Details of various government initiatives that promote the widening participation agenda were outlined.

While over the years the HEA, DES and the National Forum for T&L have reported increases in participation in HE, now more than ever, the focus is on ensuring those “entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population” (HEA, 2018b).

The focus for this research is a bridging programme between a FE college and a 3<sup>rd</sup> level university. The literature has shown that FE builds learners’ confidence and self-efficacy in relation to continuous assessment and study skills which prepares learners for the demands of higher education (National Forum for T&L, 2016). Taking everything outlined above into account and looking at the numerous studies done in relation to transitioning to HE there is an onus on FE and HE practitioners and institutions to re-examine the practices that either assist or hinder a successful transition for learners.

The second part of the literature review defined transitions and identified several key concepts that influence a successful transition for the learner. These include having access to the relevant supports to acquire the knowledge and skills for participation,

developing a sense of belonging and a learner identity to become legitimate members of the college community. Irish universities recognise the importance of these and have implemented a range of services to support the learner's transition to HE. These are the key concepts which frame this research report.

## Chapter 3 – Research Question

### 3.1 Research Statement

Enabling Transitions – Insights from Learners’ Transitional Experiences on a Further to Higher Education Bridging Programme

### 3.2 Research Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate if the NAVET programme helps support learners in their transition from FE to HE. It will focus on the transitions learners experience as they return, firstly, to learning in an FE environment and then as they are introduced and progress through the HE environment. It will investigate if attending an FE college which involves smaller class sizes, provides continuous learning supports throughout the year enabled the learner in their transition through FE and into HE. It will also consider what factors within the HE environment influenced a successful transition.

It is hoped that the insights from learners’ experiences can inform future practice, both for myself and other practitioners working on the programme and for the continual development of access programmes within the FE/HE sector. These insights may be considered for improving the programme and in the development and design of future similar programmes.

### 3.3 Research Objective

The study’s objective is to address the research question and sub-questions identified below. This involves carrying out primary research with both current and past learners on the bridging programme and compiling a comprehensive literature review on relevant areas to situate the question and the findings in the wider theoretical context. To



fully explore the experiences of learners I devised three sub-questions to be examined.

These are:

***1. How do learners perceive the bridging programme as enabling their successful transition to HE?***

Hussey and Smith (2010) emphasis the role of the educational institution in facilitating ‘desirable transitions’ (p.156). On the NAVET programme it is both the FE college and the university who provide the structures to support the ‘bridge’ from FE to HE for learners. I want to find out what practices and supports are available in both colleges to help learners develop the appropriate skills for studying in a HE college. This will involve identifying the practices that hinder this also. I also want to know if learners feel they have developed the necessary skills and what enabled the successful transition into HE (or aspiring to be in HE) for these learners. These ‘practices’ are interlinked with the academic and social integration of the student and may also have an impact on the students’ learner identity.

***2. What practices contribute to or take from a sense of belonging for learners in the colleges?***

The purpose of this question is to examine how learners feel they had integrated both academically and socially into college life and what practices in both colleges may have influenced this integration. As the learners are only in the university one day a week the aim is to find out if they are participating in academic and social activities with their peers and how this impacts their learning.

### ***3. How the bridging programme facilitates the development of a revised learner identity?***

To understand the learners' identities, where they were coming from and how they feel in relation to education, it was important to understand their previous educational experiences. This is the 'baggage' they are bringing on this journey across the 'bridge' into HE. Baggage is defined as anything such as time or external commitments that detracts from the learners' participation in college (Edwards, 1993 as cited by Mallman & Lee, 2016). The literature shows that transition can have an impact on learner identity. The aim is to investigate how they feel about the bridging programme and whether the experiences on the programme has helped them construct an identity as a HE student.

The interrelated sub-questions are based on themes identified in the literature review and are framed by a socio-cultural Community of Practice theoretical framework. The aim of the NAVET programme is to give learners an opportunity to participate in the HE community by interacting with other HE students and learning the practices so that they can become competent members of that community. Developing a sense of belonging to the community and the reframing of an identity as a HE learner are key elements which support the goal of full participation in this community (Wenger, 1998).

#### **3.4 Specific Research Context**

The NAVET programme that is the focus of this study is based in a Dublin FE college and a nearby university. The programme initially targeted learners over 23 who came from low income families in the areas adjacent to both colleges and provided an alternative pathway for those who could not access the CAO route (Rami, 2019).

It is now open to all learners from all socio-economic backgrounds and of all ages, with some limited entry requirements. There is a minimum Leaving Certificate requirement of H5 or 05 in English and H6 or 06 in four other subjects. Applicants are invited to complete a written assignment (designed by the university) before being interviewed by representatives from both colleges. With mature or early school leavers recognition is given to prior learning (RPL) for entry purposes (Whitehall College, 2019a).

Initially it was agreed between the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), now QQI, and the colleges that learners would complete six modules at level 5 in the FE college and a further two modules leading to a level 8 degree in the university. The two modules at level 8 were counted as credits towards the full level 5 major award. However, the course was reviewed in 2013/2014 as part of CAS and subsequently QQI now require learners to complete all eight modules at level 5 to get the full QQI award as well as the two modules leading to the level 8 degree (Rami, 2019).

Two of the level 5 modules are linked to the modules taught on the degree programme. In semester one learners complete the Social and Personal Development with Communication Skills module in the university alongside the level 5 Personal and Professional Development module in the FE college. The level 5 Concepts in Education and Training module was designed and written specifically for this course and reflects the Concepts & Contexts in Education and Training five-credit module completed in semester two in the level 8 programme (QQI, 2019a). The other level 5 modules aim to improve the learner's skills in computers, research and note taking skills, communication skills and an understanding of social issues surrounding education and lead to the 5M3635 major QQI Level 5 award (Whitehall College, 2019b).

The level 8 BSc in Education and Training degree programme in the university is a three/four-year course aimed at a career in education and can lead to a Masters in Education to qualify for primary school teaching. Alternatively graduates who do the four-year programme are recognised by the Teaching Council for teaching in FE (DCU, n.d.). As a graduate of the NAVET programme students can enter year one of the degree programme and are afforded modular exemptions for the two modules they complete (10 ECTS) towards their first year of study in the university. This reduces the workload for the student and may assist their transition to HE.

Learners can also apply, through CAS, for entry into a total of 14 other teaching related courses in various colleges. They can also apply for courses in the IoTs that accept CAS awards (CAO, 2019b).

### **3.5 Characteristics of the NAVET programme**

What is unique about this course is that learners attend the FE college fulltime while also attending university one day a week and have access to resources in both colleges throughout the full academic year. Although they are classified as NAVETs (Non-Award Visitors for Education and Training) in the university, they attend induction like the traditional undergraduates and are allocated student cards which allows them access to most college activities. It is open to them to; attend lectures, access the library, integrate with the traditional undergraduates - academically (during classroom discussions and group assignments) and socially (joining clubs and social events).

The programme is open to all learners with very little restrictions and guarantees a place on the level 8 BSc in Education programme upon successful completion. The other major benefit for these learners is that they only pay a nominal registration fee of €30 in

the university although they are still required to pay the fee in FE. This has a huge benefit for those learners who are unsure of their ability to succeed in university as it offers them a “low cost, low stakes taste” of university life before they make the decision to commit (Elsom, Greenway, & Marshman, 2017, p. 245).

## Chapter 4 - Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

The aim of good research is to collect reliable data, analyse it employing the appropriate methods, and suggest valid conclusions. To this end the ‘procedure of enquiry’ should match the question being asked rather than only using specific methods because of the researcher’s ontological or epistemological position in relation to knowledge (O’Leary, 2017, p. 9).

### 4.2 Epistemology

Prior to deciding on the methodological approach for this project it proved extremely valuable to examine different epistemological approaches to understand both perspectives: positivism and post-positivism. Epistemology is concerned with “how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated” (Scotland, 2012, p. 9).

#### **Positivism.**

Positivism is a view that everything can only be measured by scientific methods. If it cannot be measured, then it does not exist. In its purest form, positivism may not engage with the individual ‘human condition’ and instead be “hard, real and external to the individual” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 8). Therefore, the social scientist is an observer of social reality and their role is to analyse and interpret the reality based on laws that account for what is happening in the world. These laws provide a basis for controlling and predicting what could happen. They identify theories or hypotheses which are tenable only because of empirical evidence verifiable by direct experience and observation (Barratt cited by Cohen et al, 2007). The positivist researcher’s primary aim is to come up with an all-inclusive ‘universal theory’ to explain human and social behavior (Cohen et al., 2007, p.

22). The idea of a ‘universal theory’ adds generalizability and reproducibility to the research study which, positivists would argue, makes for a more credible study.

### **Post-positivism.**

The post-positivist worldview is that people are complex, they cannot be understood by simple measurements, they must be interpreted by considering their experiences, their diversity and their perspectives (O’Leary, 2017). Cohen et al., (2007) emphasized the importance of the ‘standpoint of individuals’ as a means of understanding their experiences in the world (p. 19). The interpretive perspective sees theory as following behind the research and built on the findings from the research rather than being tested by the research. Therefore, theory in the interpretative sense is multiple and varied and completely dependent on the situation and people being researched (ibid.).

### **Epistemological position.**

The primary aim of this research was to ‘hear’ the participants’ voices in relation to their experiences in both the FE college and the university. This objective determined the methodological approach adopted in the study which was a qualitative approach based on the post-positivist interpretative paradigm. This approach recognises that knowledge is constructed by individuals based on interactions with others and the social world (Scotland, 2012).

## **4.3 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is identified by Cooley (2013) as an ‘inclusive means’ of understanding the ‘complexities of education’ (p. 248) and asserts that the ‘richness of detail’ provides insights that would not be captured by other methods. It performs an

important role in improving our understanding of various social issues thus allowing society to find ways to improve these situations (p. 250).

The use of a qualitative method in this research allows for an in-depth exploration of the themes emerging from the learners' narratives. It will enable me to gather 'rich' data about their experiences on the NAVET programme and facilitate a deep interrogation and interpretation of the data.

### **Interviews**

Before choosing a research method, I returned to the research question and the aims of the study; to understand the experiences of these learners and discover if the NAVET programme enabled them to successfully transition to tertiary education.

My initial thought was to carry out interviews, so it was important to explore interview methods in greater detail. In the 1980s the evolving use of qualitative interviews in the social sciences was often viewed as "a progressive dialogical form of research" which afforded researchers "authentic personal relationships with their subjects" rather than the objective positivist approach of surveys or questionnaires (Kvale, 2006, p. 481).

Kvale (2006) identifies the different opinions about interviews from that of a 'dialogue' which connotes a "joint endeavour where egalitarian partners" pursue knowledge and a true understanding of the topic. In contrast is the 'agonistic' interview which is confrontational and can involve a "play on power differences and contradictions" (p. 481). He argues that interviews are not dialogues but more like a "conversation with a purpose" and suggests that the imbalances within the interview process can be due to several reasons (p. 483). These include:



- The interview is ‘ruled’ by the interviewer. They decide on the time/place, the questions asked, what ones to explore in more detail and when the interview is over.
- It is a one-way process; the interviewer asks the questions and the interviewee responds.
- The interviewer may try and manipulate the interviewee into revealing something they did not want to discuss.
- The interviewer controls the interpretation of the data collected (Kvale, 2006, p. 484-485).

Kvale (2006) does however suggest countermeasures to offset the possible one-sided interview including; not answering the questions asked, deflecting the questions or withdrawing from the interview process. He suggests ‘member checks’ as a form of validation could also be used, whereby the interviewee verifies the researcher’s interpretations, although he advises there are limits to how well this works in practice (p. 485).

Once the decision was made to use interviews, the next step was to decide on the type of interview. O’Leary (2017) submits that a structured interview suits the collection of standardized data with a set of pre-established questions asked in a ‘pre-determined order’ whereas a semi-structured interview is more ‘flexible’, where the ‘natural flow of conversation’ will determine the questions asked and other themes explored (p. 230-240). Cohen et al. (2007) suggests where the goal is to obtain “unique, non-standardized, personalized information about how individuals view the world” then a qualitative, open-

ended, unstructured interview technique is required (p. 354). I also considered the benefits of choosing a one-to-one interview or interviewing the group.

#### **4.4 Method**

The method selected was a semi-structured one-to-one interview approach which was chosen for several reasons. Firstly I felt this approach would enable participants to tell their stories, to “discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live”, the world on the NAVET programme, and to ‘voice’ their experiences from their own point of view (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 368). This was important for achieving the objective of the research project, which is to obtain individual, personal accounts as well as allowing them to elaborate on points of interest as the ‘conversation’ progressed.

Secondly, I felt the use of personal one-to-one interviews would allow me to enter into ‘authentic personal relationships’ with participants which would hopefully put them at ease where they would feel comfortable answering the questions (Kvale, 2006, p. 481). It was hoped that they would be “open, honest, knowledgeable, have good memories are not afraid to expose themselves and do not feel a need to express themselves in any particular light” (O’Leary, 2017, p. 244).

Finally, the interview would allow me to gather basic data, such as demographical information and educational background, and also allow for more complex data collection such as description of situations, participants’ feelings and perceptions. This would allow me to explore themes that emerge from the data (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 349). The general themes to be discussed were identified based on the literature review and the research questions. Within each theme I identified specific questions that would be approached in the course of the interview. The planned questions were outlined in advance (see Appendix

D). Having a planned set of questions assists the organisation and breakdown of the data, allows for an open discussion of participants' experiences in line with a subjective approach, whilst ensuring the key areas were still addressed (O'Leary, 2017).

### **Key stages in the research process**

#### ***Ethics approval from NCI***

Approval was sought from the NCI Ethics Committee before the primary research was initiated. As I was in a 'position of power' over the potential participants the approval was submitted under Category B (Vulnerable Groups - Those in a subordinate position to the researcher). An overview of the research rationale and aims, the research sample and means of analysis was included in the approval document. Copies of consent forms and information sheets were also included. Approval was received on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

#### ***Selection and role of gatekeeper***

The potential participants are a group of 13 learners on a specific course in a FE college. As their teacher I am closely involved with them and as such have a 'position of power' over them so the group was approached using a third party, a gatekeeper. The gatekeeper had no link to the group, other than being a teacher in the college, which mitigated any risk of coercion. She had some background knowledge of the course and was well versed in research ethics and procedures.

The gatekeeper's role was to bring the group together and distribute an information leaflet (Appendix A) with the details of the research project. She was briefed on the study's title, aims and objectives in advance and would therefore be able to answer any queries that came up. Once the group had been informed and had an opportunity to ask questions, those wishing to participate were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B) and

were advised they would be contacted by the researcher to arrange an interview time and place.

### ***Information pack***

An information pack was provided for each potential participant which included:

- Participant information leaflet (Appendix A)
- Consent form (Appendix B)
- Contact details for the researcher (available on all forms)

The information leaflet included the aim of the study, the format of the interview process (time, recorded and transcribed) and that it could be ended or rescheduled at any point of the process. It clearly stated that all participants are free to change their minds and withdraw from the research at any time. It advised that all recordings and transcripts would be stored on a secure server and all information included in the research would be anonymised. It also assured participants that the researcher and their academic supervisor would be the only people who would have access to the data collected. Finally, it outlined the Data Retention Policy and that all data would be discarded in a secure manner in line with Data Protection Act (2003) and the GDPR regulations (2018).

### ***Pilot study***

Once approval had been granted a pilot study was carried out. Using convenience sampling, selecting from those students present at the time, I asked for volunteers for this process and advised they would not be part of the full study. Two students volunteered. This helped me refine the questions, ensuring they were not leading the respondent, and to ensure the language used was clear and appropriate. I used a mix of both open and closed questions which provided some good insights from participants and allowed me to

restructure both my approach and some of the questions. This also gave me an opportunity to 'practice' the semi-structured approach to interviews as suggested by O'Leary (2017). After the first pilot interview I listened to the recording and, using notes taken during the process, refined the questions further. I then carried out the second pilot interview to confirm my modifications were satisfactory.

### *Sample selection*

The only selection criteria for the study was that each participant had to be currently studying on the NAVET programme or to have studied on the course in the last two years. All current learners volunteered to participate in the study. Stratified sampling was used based on; gender and mature/school leavers. However, as there was limited time available within the learners' timetable and attendance was an issue, convenience sampling was also employed. Those students who were accessible at the time were selected (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 113).

In order to collect data from past students on the programme, approval was requested and received from the FE college's Data Protection Officer. This allowed the college principal to act as a gatekeeper and circulate a request for interview to students from the past two years on the course. A summary of the purpose of the research was included in the email (Appendix C) and the Information Leaflet (Appendix A) was attached to provide all relevant information. The past students were requested to contact me directly if they were interested in being interviewed for the research. The survey was emailed to 23 past students and two past students indicated they were willing to participate in the interview process.

O’Leary (2017) suggests that “qualitative data analysis strategies are not generally dependent on large numbers” (p. 205) and as the aim of this research was to obtain rich data and to explore the participants experiences a final sample group of nine participants were interviewed.

The final sample of participants consisted of five male students, four of whom were mature students and one school leaver and four female students, one mature and three school leavers. The school leavers are all 18 years old and coming directly from completing the Leaving Certificate. The mature students are anyone over 21 in FE (Hardiman, 2012) and all of them have additional educational experiences either in an IoT, a HE college or specific training programmes for employment. Each participant was given a pseudonym. Table 1 below provides a brief biography.

*Table 1- Participant Biography*

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	School leaver /Mature	Age	Interview time in minutes
<b>Current Students</b>				
Elaine	F	School leaver	18	23
Anne	F	School leaver	18	24
John	M	School leaver	18	22
Kate	F	School leaver	18	18
Tony	M	Mature	28	62*
Ronan	M	Mature	27	19
Martin	M	Mature	22	35
<b>Past Students</b>				
Mary	F	Mature	36	36
Ivan	M	Mature	26	41

### ***Data collection***

Once a signed consent form was received from each potential participant, I copied and returned the copy to them for their own records. Keeping in mind the ‘power relationship’ between myself and the students, we identified times in our combined

timetables where both myself and the potential interviewees were free and allowed them to decide when or if they had the time to participate. As you can see from *Table 1* above, the interviews times ranged from 18-62\* minutes. While I was mindful of the time with all interviews it was also important to capture the full range of data for the study which is why some interviews took longer with the participants' agreement.

The interviews were carried out face to face on an individual basis in March/April 2019 in a pre-booked room in the FE college. Both past students agreed to be interviewed in the college also. The layout of the room was such that we sat side by side rather than across a table so it would not feel like a formal interview. Although they had already consented both to be interviewed and recorded, I asked them again before the start of each interview to ensure they were happy to proceed. I also reiterated their option to withdraw, to request the deletion of any or all data and to stop at any stage during the process.

#### **4.5 Credibility Indicators**

An important consideration for any researcher is to be aware of and manage their own biases and those inherent in society. The position of the researcher should be transparent to the reader and how it could impact the study (O'Leary, 2017, p. 57).

As a teacher on the programme I am very close to this research topic, however as a researcher it is important to acknowledge how my personal and professional opinions could influence the interpretations I make in my study. Cohen et al. (2007) identifies four possible sources of bias including my own 'attitudes, opinions and expectations', looking for answers to support 'pre-conceived notions' and misunderstanding of the question (participant) or the response (researcher) (p. 150). O'Leary (2017) suggests that remaining

neutral “demands reflexive awareness of our worldviews” and that as researchers we must ensure that what we see and interpret is not ‘coloured’ by our viewpoint (p. 57).

I was very aware of the possibility of bias and where I am coming from in relation to this research. As suggested by O’Leary I reflected on the points highlighted by Cohen et al. (2007) and this assisted me in remaining neutral throughout all stages of the process. The credibility indicators as identified by O’Leary (pp. 56-68) also aided this process.

In the interview questions I focused on the use of language and analyzing the language used by participants “from the perspective and reality of the researched, not the researcher” (O’Leary, 2017, p. 59). This meant checking with participants to ensure they understood what was asked and to ensure I interpreted the responses accurately. The pilot study also helped to refine the language used in the questions and to eliminate any leading questions that may direct the responses from participants.

During the analysis phase each data item was taken in context (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19) and used to tell the story accurately – directly from the learners’ words and experiences. This helped show that any conclusions reached can be considered ‘justified, credible and trustworthy’ taking into account the phenomena experienced by the learner (O’Leary, 2017)

Cohen et al. (2007) identify where interviewers can “impose their own definitions of situations upon participants” and cites the principal’s office as one such place where unequal relationships exist. As a teacher on the bridging programme and in a ‘position of power’ over the participants, I was aware of how this ‘power’ might be manipulated and considered how to manage it during the interview process (O’Leary, 2017). Failure to recognise any existing power relationships, such as teacher-student, could “seriously



impair the validity of the knowledge constructed” (Kvale, 2006, p. 486). Kvale (2006) also highlights the acknowledgment of ‘power dynamics’ as necessary to ensure neutrality and ethicality of qualitative interviews in the production of knowledge.

O’Leary (2017) contends that research methods need to be “consistent, logical, systematic, well documented and designed to account for research subjectivities” for it to be dependable (p. 64). This chapter provides a comprehensive description of every step in the research process and the analysis section which follows outlines in detail the systematic approach taken for analysing the data and forming conclusions based on both the direct and indirect evidence.

Cooley (2013) argues that while findings in qualitative research are not always transferable to larger populations due to the “diversity of experiences, beliefs, and interactions” it is important to be still able to discuss the ‘relevance’ of one situation to another (p. 257-258). The NAVET programme is a unique type of bridging programme however I would hope that the findings would still be relevant to other similar programmes.

Finally, to ensure auditability in this research the limitations to this study and all sources in relation to the literature review and methodology have been clearly identified. The appendix includes copies of all information provided to participants and an outline of the interview questions.

#### **4.6 Ethical Considerations**

Cohen et al (2007), addresses the ethical issues that researchers may face when conducting research and outlines the ethical obligations we have as researchers to protect our participants from any potential harm. When working with people one of the key

ethical considerations is informed consent. Informed consent contains four elements; *competence* –participants must be capable of making a decision based on the information given; *voluntarism* –participants knowingly and willingly agree to take part; *full information* – where all details regarding the research is provided for participants and *comprehension* – ensuring participants fully understands the nature of the project (p. 51-53).

As mentioned previously this study involves adult students and as their teacher I have in a position of 'power' over them (O'Leary, 2017, p. 55). This was identified in the request for ethical approval from the NCI Ethics Committee and also needs to be managed appropriately during any recruitment process to ensure the prospective candidates do not feel coerced into participating. To this end a gatekeeper was recruited to outline the process to the prospective participants and to answer questions to further clarify any information. A full information pack was also provided for each participant with my contact details should they have further questions. At the beginning of the interview each participant was advised verbally of their options to withdraw at any point and reassured that all data would be anonymized and stored securely.

Throughout the recruitment and interview process I was aware that how well the participants know and trust me may have an impact on both their decision to participate and the quality and direction of the interview (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 350). Asking in-depth questions during an interview may cause unforeseeable distress for participants. Although every attempt was made to avoid this, as a precaution, the college counsellor was available for any student who needed support after the interview process. During, and at the end of the interview, I 'checked in' (Kvale, 2006) with the student to ensure they were

comfortable with what we were discussing and were happy for me to continue. No concerns were raised, and all participants reported they were pleased to have taken part in the research.

As stated in the information leaflet, the data collected, including recordings, transcripts and any notes were stored securely either on a password protected laptop or in a locked cabinet. All transcripts were anonymised by allocating each participant a pseudonym which was used when identifying data items in the analysis phase. This also ensured confidentiality of the data. Once the research is complete the data will be deleted in line with NCI guidelines under Data Protection Act (2003) and the GDPR regulations (2018).

#### **4.7 Methodological Limitations**

It is important to document the methodological limitations when doing this research. In terms of candidates, the sample of current students was restricted to one class of 13 learners, all of whom volunteered to participate. However, approval to complete the research was received in March 2019 and the academic teaching year finished at the end of April which limited the time available for carrying out interviews and transcribing the data. This limited the number of participants to seven current students.

In relation to past students, two of the 23 students who were contacted replied. Both agreed to participate. This low response rate limited the scope of the research.

#### **4.8 Analysis**

Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 6). These ‘themes’ identify relevant items within the data which relate to the research question and is prevalent

throughout the data set. It is the researcher's job to determine the relevance of the theme based on how prevalent it is and how well it relates to the research question.

Two possible approaches were examined; a theoretical or deductive reasoning approach which is based on using the possible themes identified in the literature and exploring the raw data provided by participants in relation to these themes; or the inductive or 'bottom up' analytical approach to allow the data, rather than previous literature, guide the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As the interview questions were based on specific areas of interest in relation to the research question the deductive approach was chosen. This would allow thematic analysis within the framework of the global research question and the three sub-questions identified in the literature review. However, in the analysis it is also important to be open to 'outliers', those comments that do not naturally fit into any one theme, as these may reflect important data which proves critical to the study. This research would benefit from this combined approach and this logical process would improve the dependability and audibility of the results.

Thematic analysis is a method that can be used within most theoretical frameworks and works well within an interpretative methodology. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise the importance of clearly identifying the researcher's position in relation to knowledge (p. 5). As stated previously, the aim of the research is to appreciate the multiple realities and experiences of participants on the NAVET programme and my epistemological position is one of subjectivism. Braun and Clarke (2006) also highlight the difficulty of evaluating a research study if the researcher does not clearly identify how

they analysed their data. To this end I have employed their six-phase thematic analysis approach as outlined below (p. 16-24).

**Phase One: getting to know the data.**

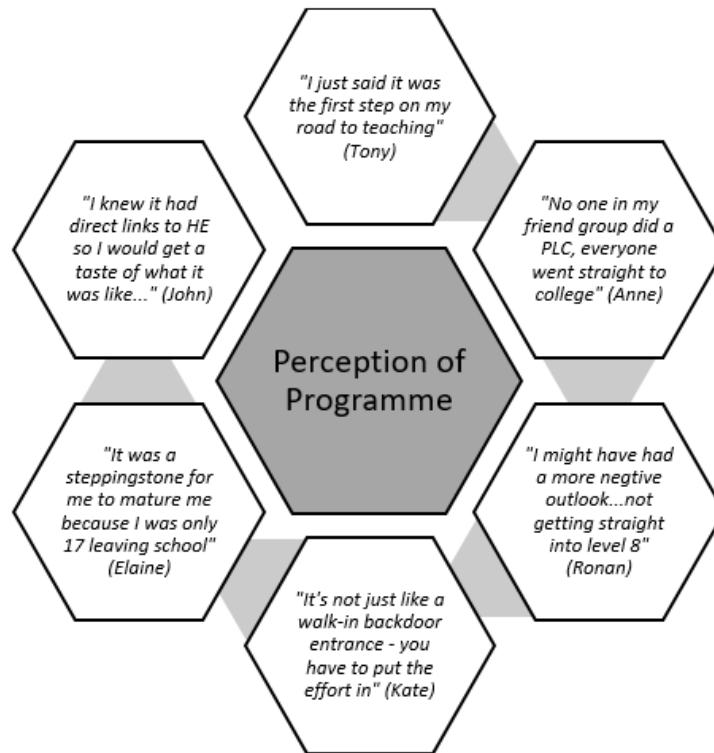
This phase involves ‘immersion’ in the data by repeatedly reading and listening to the data, to become familiar with the data. I carried out all the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Braun and Clarke (2006) identifies the process of transcribing as an ‘interpretative act’. This is certainly the case. The listening and subsequent re-listening followed by the typing up of the audio files allowed me to ‘hear’ what was being said but also the tone of the interviewee, the telling pauses before answering which could suggest a reluctance to respond, the embarrassed laugh all provided a ‘truer’ version of the interview. This process allowed me to identify and highlight items for further analysis and coding and is a key phase in the analysis (p. 17).

**Phase Two: identifying initial codes.**

This phase involved the generation of ‘initial codes’ by systematically working through each data set to ‘identify interesting aspects’ and ‘repeated patterns’ to assist the organisation of the data into meaningful groups. The coding was ‘theory-driven’, in other words the research questions were considered when analysing each data set and remained central to the process.

Bearing in mind Braun and Clarke’s (2006) key advice, I re-read each transcript to code for all potential themes keeping the relevant contextual data. I also considered that data items could belong to more than one theme and to include those items that contradict as well as corroborate a finding (p. 19). Figure 1 below demonstrates one of the initial codes (Perception of Programme) and the related transcript extracts:

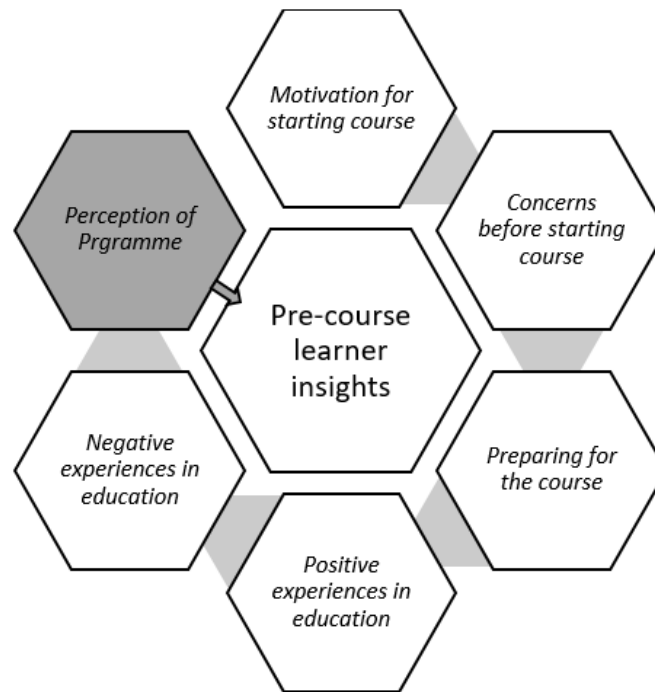
Figure 1 - Initial coding of transcript extracts



### Phase Three: searching for themes.

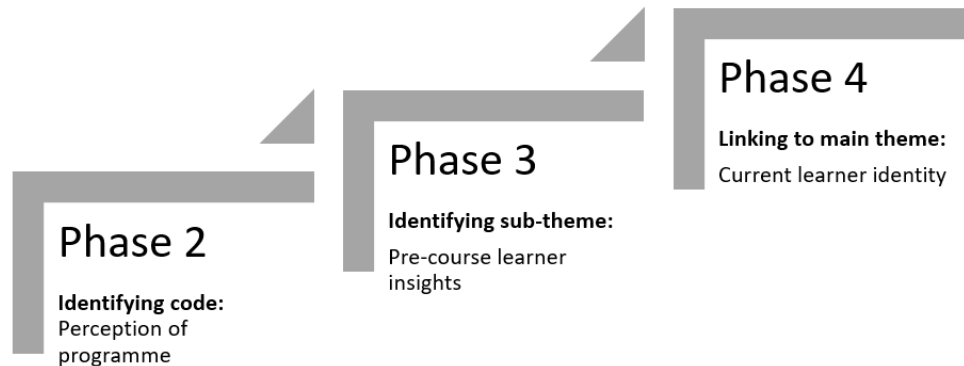
The next step is to sort the codes into potential themes. This involved examining the relationships between the codes to see if they could be combined into a smaller set of main or 'candidate' themes or sub-themes. At this point I was not ready to discard any transcript extracts while at the same time not wanting to force them into a theme. In line with the inductive approach any extracts that did not fit were identified as 'outliers' and themed as miscellaneous. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend nothing should be discarded as themes can change, be refined or split into sub-themes during the next phase (p. 20). Figure 2 below shows an example of how the initial code in Figure 1 – Perception of Programme is linked to the sub-theme Pre-course learner insights.

*Figure 2 - Coding for themes and sub-themes*



#### **Phase Four: reviewing themes.**

Once a set of themes have been identified they are now further refined. In some cases, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that sub-themes may be combined or split so each data item was re-read in context and a decision made to ensure the items within the theme ‘form a coherent pattern’ (p. 20). This was one of the more difficult parts of the thematic analysis – ensuring the transcript extract was themed correctly based on the question, the context and the response and deciding on an appropriate name for the theme. The result of this was a ‘thematic map’ which lay out all the themes and sub-themes. Figure 3 below shows how the initial code identified in phase two (Figure 1) and which was subsequently linked to the sub-theme in phase three (Figure 2) has now been linked back to a main theme.

*Figure 3 - Defining themes*

The second part of this phase involves re-visiting the complete data set to determine whether the ‘map’ is reflected therein. By re-reading the entire data set at this point, I was able to see where the thematic map could be applied and at the same time be open to new themes that may not fit the map. Braun and Clarke (2006) warn of the issues of ‘endless re-coding’ so once there are no other significant additions to the thematic map, they suggest researchers should “recognise this and stop” (p. 21). At this point I felt I had addressed the themes sufficiently and no new themes were coming to light, so coding was complete.

#### **Phase Five: defining and naming themes.**

This penultimate phase involves ‘defining and refining’ the themes again to identify what feature of the data set is captured by each theme. As I had already collated the data items for each theme this involved organising the items in such a way so they would form a ‘coherent’ account relative to the theme and including an appropriate narrative that explains “what is interesting about them and why!” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22).

The narratives for each theme should fit together and relate to the overall ‘story’ about the data set which in turn relates to the research question. At the end of this phase I



had produced a detailed written analysis relating to each theme. This was a difficult phase as I had so many transcript extracts related to each theme and had to be selective in choosing the extracts that encapsulated the ‘essence’ of the relevant point within the story (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23).

**Phase Six: producing the report.**

The final phase in thematic analysis involves putting together the whole story and writing up the findings chapter in the dissertation. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise that the thematic analysis should provide a “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account” of the story within the data. Within the ‘story’ each theme should include enough supporting transcript extracts to validate the existence of that theme throughout the data set. Each extract should be supported with an ‘analytic narrative’ that puts forward an argument pertaining to the research question and which clearly shows how this method led to those conclusions (p. 23).

## Chapter 5 – Analysis and Results

### 5.1 Introduction

The overarching research objective is to investigate the transitional experiences of a group of learners on this FE to HE bridging programme. The NAVET programme attracts a variety of learners whose goal is to become teachers. It offers learners a ‘bridge’ between FE and higher education and a chance to understand what is expected to reach this goal. The FE college and the university are the pillars that support this ‘bridge’ or programme. The practices in both colleges lay the foundation for the successful transition of the learner to HE, integrate with their fellow HE learners and develop a sense of identity and belonging to the college.

In order to answer research question one, the analysis will investigate the experiences of learners in the colleges and the practices and situations that either support or hinder their journey and transition on the programme. Subsequently, in response to question two, these and other practices will be examined to understand how they may have affected the academic and social integration of learners in the colleges.

The last question is to understand how the NAVET programme assists in the development of a positive learner identity. In order to answer this, I will analyse how participants now feel about the course, how they feel they have developed both academically and personally and what they see as their next steps.

The themes identified are interrelated at various times throughout the analysis.

For the purposes of the analysis it was important to firstly understand the participants’ educational backgrounds and their reasons for choosing this bridging programme. Wenger (2010) suggests the trajectory of each individual student incorporates

the “memories, competencies, key formative events, stories, and relationships to people and places” (p. 5). This is the ‘baggage’ they are carrying which may influence how they participate in these new communities of both further and higher education. Table 2 below provides a brief synopsis of this data for each participant. As previously stated, the school leavers are 18 years old, coming directly from the LC whereas a mature learner is anyone over 21 who has been out of school a while. In this study the mature participants have additional educational experiences in either an IoT, a HE college or specific training for employment.

*Table 2 - Participant Backgrounds*

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Mature/School Leaver</b>	<b>Educational Experience</b>	<b>Choosing the course</b>
<b>Current Students</b>			
Elaine	School leaver	Felt school went “downhill” after skipping Transition Year and found it difficult to make new friends.	Saw the course as a “steppingstone” and felt if she went straight into college, she would have been lost at 17.
Anne	School leaver	Just able to get a passable grade	Failed Maths in LC so was “bitter” about having to do the bridging programme.
John	School leaver	“It [school] was fine...until maybe 6 <sup>th</sup> year and then the standard maybe fell a little bit”.	Missed out on place through CAO and was “struggling to make a decision” before deciding this was the “best option”.
Kate	School leaver	Positive experience in school.	Missed out on place through CAO and always expected to do a FE course.
Tony	Mature	“Definitely mixed feelings...I was bullied...I had some bad experiences with teachers...absent quite a lot”. Attended an IoT – dropped out in 2 <sup>nd</sup> year “tried again, failing again” and felt he “just couldn’t really do it”.	Wanted a “better career...a better work-life balance” saw the course as an “extra opportunity” and an “first step on my road into teaching” but was “really, really afraid” that wouldn’t see it through.

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Mature/School Leaver</b>	<b>Educational Experience</b>	<b>Choosing the course</b>
Ronan	Mature	“Struggled a lot...difficult to keep up with work”, “50/50 experience”.	“Negative” feelings about starting the course - wanted to go “straight to level 8”.
Martin	Mature	“I got on very well in school”. Attended an IoT – did 2 years, decided he “hated it” and left.	“I want to teach”. The chance to experience HE was the “cherry on the cake”.
<b>Past Students</b>			
Mary	Mature	“Positives and negatives...struggling with communication because English wasn’t my first language ...moved around a lot”.	Mary wanted to get her “foot into education” and saw the course as a “steppingstone into education”.
Ivan	Mature	Found secondary school “harder to navigate socially”. Attended two universities and dropped out of both.	“Terrified to come back after dropping out twice” and afraid that he would not be able to see it through.

The main motivation for all participants in applying for the course was to enter HE to become teachers although some were unsure what area of teaching they were interested in. “I wanted to work in education and education was my passion” (Mary), “I was so fixated at becoming an educator” (Kate). All the students were aware of the direct link to the HE college and this was the main incentive for joining this course.

As evidenced above each participant is coming from different backgrounds with different ‘baggage’ to cross the ‘bridge’ into HE. Some, like Anne, John, Kate and Ronan felt they did not need a bridge and should have gone straight to HE. This may prevent them from participating fully in the FE community.

Others, such as Elaine and Mary, valued the ‘bridge’ and the experiences it may bring which may positively influence their participation. Martin, coming straight from an IoT, had no fears about changing trajectories. Tony and Ivan, both of whom had tried HE previously

and have been out of education for a while, were concerned about their ability to see the course through. They may not see themselves as ‘legitimate’ learners.

## **5.2 Practices on the NAVET Programme**

Several studies identify the importance of the practices within colleges for supporting a successful transition to higher education (Briggs et al., 2012; Fleming, 2010; Thomas, 2012) with Briggs et al. highlighting the importance of support on “both sides of the transition bridge” (p. 4). Learners were asked several questions in relation to the practices and supports available both within FE and HE that they felt enabled their successful transition on the programme. This section will examine the findings.

### **Scaffolding the learners.**

The key finding from all participants was that they felt supported in the FE college and this support was necessary for their successful transition to HE. Tony identified this as the “scaffolding” for building his new career in education which reflects Vygotsky’s (1934) learning theory. Of the nine participants, six started the programme feeling anxious about their ability to succeed on the course and being able for university. Three of the school leavers felt they might have “run out” (Elaine), “dropped out” (Kate) and would not “have survived” (Anne) had it not been for the support of their peers and staff in FE.

The participants identified teaching practices and developing new skills as valuable in their transition.

### ***Teaching practices***

Within FE several participants identified teaching practices such as project work, continuous assessment, feedback and more face to face learning as elements that supported

their transition. Elaine enjoyed the practical aspects of the course and how different it was to secondary school:

*I loved how kind of 'hands on' it was, how there was like proper assignments, proper due dates, things that were like practical skills like presentations, public speaking, things that I would have never had experience of in secondary school.*

Anne, who struggled with exams in secondary school, highlighted the importance of continuous assessment and feedback for her:

*...knowing that you've got like that part of the module done and X amount of a distinction is really reassuring compared to like not knowing...in 6<sup>th</sup> [year] you're just studying in the hopes you get something...everything was continuous assessment, like I knew I could hand drafts in...*

With regards teaching practices within the HE environment the participants had very mixed opinions. Several students highlighted the “do your own thing approach” in HE and identified the “two extremes” between FE where it’s “really supportive” and HE where it is “literally like sink or swim” (Anne).

In semester one the HE group was smaller, and most found the lecturer “very approachable” and “you could talk to her if you had any issues” (Kate) and “felt able to speak” to her (Anne). Elaine however strained to hear what was going on in class because “people were laughing and talking” and when she got the courage to say this to the lecturer felt “there was no kind of help there”. The knock-on effect of this incident meant that Elaine did not feel comfortable asking questions after being “shot down”. Anne highlighted the importance of feeling comfortable asking or answering questions in class:

*...how you learn can be affected by if you feel confident to put up your hand in the classroom and answer a question...*

The second semester module initiated mixed feelings among the group. Ronan felt the lecturer was “very well prepared and professional” providing online notes in advance. Similarly, Elaine felt the second module was a lot better because he had “ground rules, no talking, no phones, nothing like that” and at the end of class “you can go up and ask him if you have a problem”.

John, in contrast, found the teaching approach in the second semester module more difficult suggesting the lecturer was really “negative” who “gave off a really autocratic vibe” which meant he was not comfortable asking questions. This may have impacted his engagement and learning within that module.

While some participants in this study felt it helped them develop as independent learners, the school leavers struggled with the new approach and felt it was the additional support of FE that enabled them to succeed:

*...I wouldn't have had a clue only for FE and that module. (Elaine)*

### ***Developing new skills***

Participants identified the academic skills they had acquired and improved on since starting the programme and which they felt assisted them in HE. This included research and referencing skills, communication skills, time management and ICT skills.

Several participants mentioned the benefits of doing presentations in the FE college which also supported them in HE. Mary, who had been asked to speak at the graduation, explained what it meant for her:

*I can't put a price on the presentation and public speaking experience  
...really just getting the confidence and the experience of being in front of a  
group...*

Kate identified the practice of doing “mocks and smaller mocks” and the feedback from both peers and teachers before doing a big presentation as a key way of improving presentation skills. Tony also felt that the “closer level of help” available in the FE class gave him a “head start” when presenting in HE.

Academic writing appeared to have been a challenge for quite a few of the learners. Kate, who had just completed the Leaving Certificate noticed the difference:

*...the academic writing style was completely different than it was in secondary school...I couldn't get my head around it originally.*

Tony also highlighted the challenge of writing academically after at least six years out of education and found it was “just a different kind of approach”.

Participants also felt the modules in FE prepared them well for the two modules they were studying in HE and the FE teachers supported them with this work:

*I saw it as an advantage the longer it went on because we can get help with whatever we're doing in HE ... practice an element of what we do in HE in FE and sometimes they mirror, the two can mirror each other and sometimes you can do a piece of work, like for FE and it's very closely related to something in HE (Tony)*

*...a lot of the work we did in our modules we later covered again in HE...so it was really a symbiotic thing. (Anne)*

The modules in FE are designed specifically to mirror the two modules studied in the HE college and it would appear this ‘mirroring’ supports the learners deeper understanding of the topics. Ivan, the past mature student who is now in his second year of the BSc, described the difference the programme made for him when he entered HE as an undergraduate:

*...you hit the ground running when you start in HE...everyone had issues with like referencing and figuring stuff out about where books were in the library and finding resources and all that kinds of stuff so I had that*



*already done...yeah, I'm definitely much more refined in terms of academic skills...*

### **Learners recognising the need for support.**

The findings suggest that the mature participants were more likely to seek professional support in the HE college and this support helped them in their transition. They attended the library regularly and various workshops such as essay writing skills which they found beneficial:

*...it's definitely worth my while going there...a real practical approach to actually writing essays...you can bring your essays to them and you can get, you know, a lot of feedback and help...(Tony)*

*...the first one is on time management skills and then you do one on organisational skills and just those kind of soft skills...(Ivan)*

Martin the only mature learner who did not avail of any additional support reported issues with some assignments. He described one assessment he found difficult:

*It wasn't described very well, like the layout, the content... the information that we had to put in...the blind leading the blind, so I just felt that frustrating and it wasn't guiding whatsoever even on the brief...so I had to go source my own material from the library and online.*

In some cases, it is those who need the support the most who refuse to look for or accept it (Bentley and Allen, 2006 as cited by Thomas, 2012). Martin had already completed a level 5 course and completed two years in an IoT, and it is possible that he felt looking for support may be a sign of weakness.

Elaine and Anne, both school leavers, found the library useful for research however Anne did not seek support for her dyscalculia. She felt that because of issues with:

*...the registration, meeting [course coordinator] and just getting the class sorted was such a mess, I'm not going to try and get into the whole learning support aspect of it.*

This shows perhaps a 'fear' of accessing the services because the initial process of registration and induction was not as welcoming as they had hoped. It could also imply a lack of confidence in the younger learners where they do not yet 'fit in' as undergraduates.

### **Labelling - the level 5 learners.**

While there were several practices that supported learners in their transition to HE there were also some which constrained this transition. These included issues with induction, being singled out as 'level 5 learners' in the first lecture and having limited access to support and guidance services because of their status as NAVETs.

### ***Issues at induction***

First impressions are crucial for new learners entering college and may have a negative impact on any subsequent learning opportunities. There were issues during the induction process and first lecture which caused frustration for participants. Anne described trying to get student cards:

*...we were all like lining up to get our picture taken for the cards and then being told that like we weren't allowed to register...it was almost as if they weren't like prepared for us...I walked up to the woman in the reception and was like 'Do you have any information on this class?'...She was completely like 'sort it out yourself'.*

Kate remembered the confusion of the first lecture:

*...the lecturer wasn't there on time...it kind of shook us a little bit and we didn't know what to do, was this going to happen on a regular basis...*

These initial negative experiences appeared to affect the school leavers more which may be due to lack of confidence and not seeing themselves as 'legitimate' HE learners because they had not entered via the typical progression route.

### ***Being singled out***

One of the main issues identified by most of the group came up during the first lecture in semester one. During this lecture the class were asked "where are the FE level 5 students?" (Tony) and requested to raise their hands. Anne described the scene:

*...we were all sitting in the back like with our hands up and everyone turning around and looking at us and it was a real feeling of like us and them.*

This incidental remark caused significant problems for the group, both academically and socially, but also to the learners individually. From an academic perspective, the practice of singling out the FE group meant they felt alienated in the class which prevented them from engaging with the traditional undergraduates:

*One of the weeks after that we had to kind of like engage with other people, they weren't really having any of it because they were like 'Oh they're the FE people at the back, leave them to them'. (Elaine)*

This 'singling out' caused tensions in the class and group work became an issue. The class were told to choose their own groups to work with and neither the traditional undergraduates nor the FE learners chose to mix although Elaine did make one attempt and was "brushed off".

The learners felt they had missed on out getting the "input and their experiences" (Elaine) of the traditional undergraduates and John felt:

*...it would have been better even from just an academic point of view like two different groups of people from different mixes like coming together and different ideas.*

In contrast the past students, Mary and Ivan, were assigned groups and mixed with the traditional undergraduates. They got the opportunity “to get to know some of the other students” and Mary felt it was great “to get that experience of working with different groups and different people”. Ivan felt one of the advantages of mixing with the traditional undergraduates was hearing about the different group projects and what each group was working on.

The comment was made by a novice lecturer in the HE college and was probably not meant to cause offense or to alienate the learners. However, it appears to have had a significant impact on some participants.

### *Access to support services*

While the mature learners had accessed support services, they all remarked how difficult it was to fit these in around their combined FE/HE timetable and having to choose one or the other:

*...a lot of them [support classes] were on days that we had like a full day here [FE college], so it was a toss-up between, like do you miss a class to go to that kind of thing or what do we do? (Ivan)*

Although the NAVETs have access to most of the professional services in the HE college, Mary pointed out that one significant service, the guidance counsellor, was not available to them:

*...something that could have been really useful for a student going there, it wasn't something like using the gym...it was career guidance...this could actually be very beneficial...*

Participants are only in the HE college one day a week and have a full 20-hour timetable in the FE college which limits their options when it comes to attending support services in HE.

### **Too much support in FE?**

While supportive teachers are one of the key practices that enabled learners to transition the findings suggest this is not always a good thing and, in some ways, may constrain transition and hinder participants development as autonomous and independent learners.

In his interview, Martin identified the amount of flexibility with deadlines and the extensive feedback that he got for assignments which suggests he was very closely tutored and supported in FE “if they [FE teachers] have to put a lead on you and drag you over the line, they will do”.

Similarly, Kate suggested they were “monitored” and “watched over to make sure you have everything right” with Elaine also suggesting that the teachers “want the best for us” and they will “just keep pushing us till they get the best”.

FE is a supportive environment however these comments suggest that the level of support and feedback provided may have been excessive and prevented independent learning.

### **5.3 Belonging or not Belonging**

Thomas (2012) identified a ‘strong sense of belonging’ resulting from engagement in both academic and social practices as key for student success in HE (p. 13). This section of the analysis will examine the practices in both colleges that contributed to or took from the participants ‘sense of belonging’ to the college communities.

#### **A ‘sense of belonging’ in FE?**

There were several practices identified that may have contributed to the participants sense of belonging to the FE community. These include class activities, having someone to

relate to, a welcoming environment and having the support of the FE group when attending the HE college.

### ***Class activities***

Elaine and Tony highlighted the class activities that helped them bond with other learners:

*...in one of our very first classes we did like an icebreaker and I actually thought it was really kind of engaging...actually really, really good and that's kind of how we did bond at the start. (Elaine)*

*...we were put in a debating team and that was the first time me and three other classmates went to the pub and we actually talked about the what we're going to do for the debate...it makes a big difference to actually get closer with people and to see that you're not just a person in class...(Tony)*

Mary and Tony identified the social events in the FE college as ways of meeting people and integrating into college life and suggests they are “a little boost” (Tony) for everyone.

### ***Someone to relate to***

The importance of having someone to relate to was highlighted by several learners. Tony felt the class was a “good mix” of mature students and some “bordering on mature” who he could relate to:

*I thought the class was like you know, it had a good mix, ...being able to talk to people that can like relate to where you're coming from, similar circumstances that maybe tried education, wasn't for them at the time...and then came back to it.*

Mary, a past student, felt she had also “made a lot of friends” because they were “on the same path” even though she was older than most of her classmates. Similarly, Ronan felt he had naturally “cemented” himself into college life and

identified the “new friendships” he had made as key in his overall experience of the programme.

Elaine and Kate, both school leavers, were worried initially when they attended for interview and met only mature learners which nearly put them off joining the course but had subsequently clicked with all their peers.

### *Welcoming environment*

Martin, Ronan and Anne felt that “all the teachers were very welcoming and made you feel comfortable” and there was “a lot of exercises to get everybody to relax and get to know each other better” (Ronan) which enabled learners to engage with each other and make friends. When talking about the environment in the FE college, Anne “felt comfortable” voicing her opinions and asking and answering questions in class. Mary found it “more supportive” and emphasised the importance of this for her as she had some personal challenges during her time on the course.

The teachers were generally described as “approachable and understanding and flexible” (Mary) or “really nice and really helpful” (Elaine). Like Anne, the other participants felt comfortable ‘having a chat’ with the teachers and asking for support when they needed it.

*...it was really informal...everyone has a chat and like the kind of relationship you get to build with tutors and having a bit of a laugh and you know in class it was great... (Ivan)*

Tony felt that being treated like “student teachers” and discussing “different aspects of education” helped him get into the ‘mindset’ of becoming a teacher. He explained it further:

*...even just talking to other teachers it does help, like when the other tutors and teachers...they're talking to us...giving us little things about this is*

*what I've learned'... 'this is what this is shaping up like' or 'I know people who are into guidance and they're saying this' and you know it's good being able to know about what's out there and...being treated like, we are kind of student teachers...because a lot of us are or we will be next year, we'll be on that track...*

The experiences of the learners in the FE college appear to reflect a positive and supportive atmosphere where learners felt part of the community of the college “there’s a great sense of community among the teacher and the class” (Elaine) or even like Tony, starting to feel part of a community of student teachers.

### ***Having the group support in HE***

All participants appreciated the support of the FE group when they went to HE for the first time. Kate identified the group as the “net” behind her that she could fall back on “just in case something went wrong”.

Ivan explained the difference having a support group made for him in participating in class:

*...definitely it made me more comfortable going into lectures and engaging with like the material and class as...you know the lecturer will throw a question out to the room, not a lot of people are going to answer, but I felt very comfortable doing it because, you know, you're with people, I've done this stuff in class so if I'm saying 'oh, we did this in class' and 'we learned about that' ... it was handy having people you knew that knew what you were talking about...*

Like the others, Elaine was happy that she “had that kind of security and safety background with FE” and especially found it of benefit when they were pointed out as level 5 students:

*...having everyone else there was the good part, like if I would have been on my own, I would have like ran out.*



### A 'sense of belonging' in HE?

The findings identified some practices that may have prevented learners from developing a sense of belonging to the HE college. These include the labelling of participants as 'level 5 learners', the downsides of being in a large group and less interaction with HE faculty staff.

#### *Feeling like 'outsiders'*

Incidental remarks by lecturers can cause feelings of alienation and distress for some learners. The participants' views of HE were mixed with all the school leavers feeling like "outsiders" (John) and "separated from the class" (Anne) and felt "embarrassed" (Elaine and John) at being pointed out as level 5 or "people that are taking the backdoor entrance" (Kate) in the very first lecture. The comment by the lecturer "where are the FE level 5 students?" (Tony) had a profound impact on these learners, which is evident not only in their descriptions of the event but also in the tone in which they relayed this. Anne described the scene:

*So, we were all sitting in the back like with our hands up and everyone turning around and looking at us and it was a real feeling of like us and them, like separated from the class.*

Elaine identified how this incident impacted the relationship with the traditional undergraduates:

*...everyone kind of like just turned around and was like 'Oh God' and then like one of the weeks after that when we had to like kind of engage with other people they weren't really having any of it because they were like 'Oh they're the FE people at the back, leave them to them'.*

While Tony, a mature learner, was aware of the incident and felt it made "a difference to the class" it did not make a difference to him personally. He felt it was

something that he would have said himself at some point “we’d probably have said it casual conversation” and it would be “forgotten about” in weeks.

Other mature learners, Ronan and Martin, did not appear to be aware of the divide with Ronan saying he felt he had also integrated well:

*...it feels pretty natural, and I do all my studying on my extra assignment work in [HE college] library so I feel pretty comfortable there at this stage...*

Mary and Ivan, both past students, while having a more positive experience in their first class also identified being singled out but in a slightly different fashion.

During their induction session, which was just for the FE group, Ivan told us:

*...a lot of things were said about ‘so don't feel pressured to keep up with the other students like you've to remember that you're doing a level 5’...I felt like we're doing the same module, we're not doing the degree at level 8, which is fine and now having done the first year of the degree, I tell you this was more work.*

He identified something similar happening in the second semester with a different lecturer:

*...the lecturer we had for History did a similar thing in the class which kind of was very annoying but was more letting us know that he expected us all to perform to the same standard despite some of us not being on the thing [full course]...*

Mary referred to it as “the elephant in the room” which created “a kind of negative environment”. She also felt it had an impact when they joined a club for “teachers to be” and sensed “a bit of a shift” once they said they were not students.

Whether the group was singled out or volunteered their status as NAVETs there was a similar response from the traditional undergraduates. This appears to have had a negative impact on some participants’ sense of belonging to the HE college and their learner identity as HE students.

### ***'Downsides' of being in a group***

Several participants were aware of the 'downsides' of already belonging to a group and how that may have impacted their integration with the traditional undergraduates. Anne felt it may have "closed me off" from integrating because she did not "need" them while Mary stated it was "easy to be with the person you know and not actually make an effort" to get to know other people. Martin felt he may have been "relying on them [FE group] a bit too much" and Elaine explained why she felt it had a "negative impact":

*...I think by having the name of 'the FE Group' down the back like obviously that kind of had a negative impact...if we wouldn't have been known as 'the FE people' then maybe it would have been easier to integrate... (Elaine)*

The label of 'the FE people' or 'level 5 learners' which was put on them by the lecturer in that very first lecture appears to have had a significant impact on how these learners view themselves in the HE environment. It may also have limited their integration with the traditional undergraduates.

### ***Interaction with HE faculty***

There appeared to be a lot less interaction between the students and the faculty staff in the HE college. This is hardly surprising given the numbers in the HE classes and the fact that the FE students only attended the HE college one day a week, with only one module to complete each semester. Some issues were already identified in the previous section of this analysis. Participants opinions varied about the different lecturing approaches and how they felt about them, and these are also relevant here in terms of engaging the participants and fostering a sense of belonging to the HE college.

**Mixed emotions.**

There was a significant difference in the responses from the mature learners and the school leavers when asked to describe their feelings about going to the HE college and whether they felt they belonged there.

Ivan and Mary, the two past students, described their first venture into HE as “brilliant, very positive” (Mary) and explained their excitement of getting the “whole university experience of being in the university building, on a campus” (Mary) and “the fantasy of the big lecture halls” (Ivan).

Tony described it as “a change of scenery” and a “reminder” of where he was going, and never felt he had to “drag” himself there. He was however aware of how he may be perceived by the younger learners on the course, afraid they may think him a “failure” and “ancient”. He found it easier to mix with the other mature students in the HE college as he found “they were just coming back [to education]” and they did not show any “snobbery” about where anyone was coming from. This may have been because they are also considered ‘non-traditional’ learners and know how it feels to go back to education. All five of the mature learners had a sense of belonging to the HE college although Mary was aware that they were “not fully HE students”.

John, a school leaver, thought it was going to be “scary” while Kate and Elaine admitted to being “nervous” going in. Anne remembers “being turned off” the university because they were singled out as FE learners and felt it was a “hostile environment” for learning. Of the school leavers Elaine, declaring a “right” to

belong, and Kate felt they belonged in HE with John suggesting he still felt like an “outsider”.

#### **5.4 A Revised Learner Identity**

One of the key concepts explored in the literature review was the development of each participant’s ‘learner identity’ or how they perceive themselves as learners. The participant profile at the beginning of this chapter provided a synopsis of the possible ‘baggage’ each participant was carrying on this journey across the bridge into HE. This section will investigate how participants perceive their learner identity coming near the end of the programme.

##### **I’m studying what I want to study.**

The participants chose this programme because they wanted to become teachers. A key finding from this study is how learners are motivated to continue in HE when they find a programme that is of interest to them and is related to their future aspirations.

For most of the mature learners, the NAVET programme was their ‘second chance’ or in some cases ‘third chance’ in education. One of the key things that came out of the interviews was their renewed determination to become teachers and the importance of studying something they were interested in. Mary spoke about her dedication to learning something she loved:

*I was actually working because I wanted to do it, I was motivated to do it, inspired to do it. You know it showed when I'm really, really enjoying something how much I can get done and what I can do and I don't need an alarm clock to wake up...I was living, breathing, reading everything education*

...

Tony identified the NAVET programme as having “skin in the game” because it has helped him get into the “mindset of becoming a teacher” and making it a “real thing”. He showed self-awareness when choosing his next step admitting that he was “afraid to do an Arts course” because he might “get stuck in the short-sightedness” of not being able to see the end goal. He chose instead to do a secondary teaching qualification that incorporates two subjects with teaching placement throughout to keep him “more in touch with the goal of becoming a teacher”.

Martin, who had switched careers after two years studying Business, also showed a positive attitude to going to HE to study what he wanted to study:

*... I'm studying what I want to study and I'm good at what I want to study as well, so like it's not about should I be there? it's I want to be there... I just want to be in HE next year...*

These mature learners have already tried HE and left for various reasons. They now appear happy with their course choices and see a definite plan for their future careers.

Anne and Elaine, both school leavers, felt they have “grown a lot in this year” and are “far more determined” (Anne). This is because they see a point and a benefit to the learning which will help them get into college.

The other participants were “hopeful” about getting the course they want next year, Ronan found the course helped him see his “end goal” and made him “more confident going into a level 8” course while John has a “definite plan...hopefully” for his future. Kate saw the course as the “foundation for everything” and “hopefully, touch wood, I get on the Education and Training course”.

All the participants have the goal of becoming teachers and that goal seems more attainable after completing the NAVET programme.

### **Prepared for HE.**

Improved confidence and belief in their ability to achieve in HE is evident in a lot of the responses from participants with most putting this confidence down to their improved academic skills such as presenting and academic writing and a better understanding of what is expected at university.

Ivan identified one of the benefits of the course content was having the “language to be articulate about what you are saying” while Tony explained how it has helped him critically think “about a lot of different aspects of education”. Several participants felt they are better prepared for level 8 assessments with Kate suggesting she has developed “a writing style for university level”.

Several participants mentioned learning independently with Kate explaining how different it was from school because you have the support, can get feedback but still work independently. Doing presentations first in FE and subsequently in HE had a positive impact on the participants’ confidence in their ability to stand up and speak in front of a group. John, Kate and Elaine felt it brought them out of their shells while Tony and Mary saw the benefit of good preparation for good presentation.

As previously stated, participants highlighted a diversity of teaching styles both in the FE and HE colleges. Although there were both positive and negative comments, these experiences also prepared them for HE.

**The elephant in the room.**

Finally, the elephant in the room, the labelling of the participants as ‘level 5 learners’. As stated previously this label had a bigger impact on the school leavers than the mature learners. Participants identified how they felt it had impacted their academic and social integration with comments like being “brushed off” (Elaine) and “outsiders” (John). It is difficult to say how much this label could have impacted the school leavers’ learner identity. However, listening to their accounts of how it happened, their anger and embarrassment at being singled out and the fact that they remember it so vividly suggests it had an impact. This will be discussed in more detail in the discussion section of this report.

**5.5 Summary of Findings**

The findings identified the diversity of learners that use the NAVET programme as a steppingstone into college and subsequently into teaching. This diversity, as outlined in the introduction of this chapter, is evident in the different educational experiences, attitudes and responses to the bridging programme by the participants. In general, the learners perceived the bridging programme as beneficial for their transition to HE. They identified the supports provided in the FE college as necessary both in relation to the level 5 course and to compensate for any ‘gaps’ in their learning in the HE college. They also acknowledged the benefit of getting a ‘taste’ of university life and a better understanding of what is expected on a level 8 course as key for making an informed decision about their next step.

Several practices within the HE environment, such as the labelling of the learners as ‘level 5 learners’, were identified as having a negative impact on the transition



especially for the school leavers. The HE teaching and learning practices were also more of a challenge for the school leavers which may have been due to the fact that they did not seek support in the HE college and relied on the support in FE. Over supportive teachers in the FE college was also identified as a factor that may hinder independent learning.

A sense of community was highlighted in relation to the FE college. Several participants spoke about how it fostered their sense of belonging to that college. The support of the FE group when in HE was also considered important for participants, although some also identified the ‘downsides’ of being in a large group when trying to integrate with the traditional undergraduates. All the mature learners felt a sense of belonging to the university while only half of the school leavers felt they belonged.

For each participant the development of a learner identity was varied with most being more confident in their academic abilities and some feeling they had developed as autonomous and independent learners. All participants felt they were stronger academically and more prepared for the challenges of HE.

The next chapter provides a discussion which examines the above findings in relation to the transitional experiences of these learners under the three concepts: the practices that support transition, a sense of belonging and learner identity.

## **Chapter 6 - Discussion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the transitional experiences of a group of learners on a FE to HE bridging programme, the NAVET programme. The research statement was divided into three sub-questions: (i) How do learners perceive the bridging programme as enabling their successful transition to HE? (ii) What practices contribute to or take from a sense of belonging for learners in the colleges? (iii) How the bridging programme facilitates the development of a revised learner identity?

In order to effectively answer the over-arching research statement, each of these sub-questions will be discussed.

### **6.2 Practices on the NAVET Programme**

#### **Scaffolding the learners.**

The evidence suggests that the support provided in FE was necessary for these learners to successfully transition to HE. The participants identified teaching practices such as: continuous assessment; project work; and feedback as aiding their transition. These practices are prevalent in FE and HE. For the school leavers especially, this may have been their first experience of these teaching practices as the Leaving Certificate is still primarily exam based. Anne, like a lot of learners, had previously struggled with summative exams and identified formative assessment as beneficial for her. It was evident that for both the school leavers and the mature learners formative assessment provided scaffolding for these participants in their transition to HE.

Participants compared the different teaching and learning styles employed by FE teachers and some lecturers in the HE college. Several of the school leavers highlighted

the “do your own thing approach” in HE and identified the ‘two extremes’ between FE where it’s ‘really supportive’ and HE where it is ‘sink or swim’. The different approach to teaching in HE is something that has been identified in various studies as challenging for new learners transitioning to HE (Palmer et al., 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Responses from the school leavers suggest they were most affected. Perhaps this is because they are still maturing as learners and have also just completed the Leaving Certificate. They may be used to the rote learning and ‘teaching to the exam’ that is prevalent in the senior cycle. Hyland (2011) identified the ongoing criticisms of the Leaving Certificate in her paper and suggests it “left students ill-equipped to meet the challenges of third level”. It could be argued that HE colleges are fully aware of the experiences of school leavers and the supposed deficiencies in the Leaving Certificate and should therefore do more to ensure the transition is successful for these learners. In contrast the mature learners did not appear unduly affected which may be due to their previous experience of the more complex learning challenges of HE or specific training for employment as mentioned previously.

Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke da Silva and Brinkworth (2011) identified the unrealistic expectations learners have when entering university including the level of feedback and access to lecturers for support. In this case these ‘unrealistic expectations’ may have been further amplified by the abundance of support provided in FE.

Participants highlighted the new skills they had developed such as research and referencing skills, ICT and presentation skills which is one of the main aims of the NAVET programme and which they rely on in university. The National Forum for T&L (2015) report identified the importance of providing these types of academic skills for preparing

learners for university. Two of the modules studied in the FE college reflect the modules studied in university and this was viewed as an “advantage” by participants and a “foundation” for the learning in third level. Briggs et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of having “integrated systems” which is echoed in this study where the modules mirror the work in HE giving learners an opportunity to get a deeper understanding of the topic (p. 16).

### **Learners recognising the need for support.**

Interestingly while all participants valued the support provided in the FE college it was mainly the mature learners who availed of additional supports in the HE college.

Both cohorts identified academic writing as a definite ‘challenge’ which is reflected in Murphy and Fleming’s (2000) study of mature students returning to education. The mature participants on the NAVET programme were proactive when they encountered this challenge by attending writing workshops which may reflect their determination to succeed the second time around. However, the school leavers did not feel ‘comfortable’ asking for support either within the class or from support services. Anne identified how this discomfort affected her in two ways. Academically she saw this as impacting her learning “how you learn can be affected by if you feel confident to put up your hand in the classroom and answer a question”. She also suggests that this ‘fear’ of saying ‘something weird’ and being laughed at would compound any self-doubt a person was feeling which may impact their identity as learners.

In FE, class interaction and discussions are encouraged where possible and this group of learners were accustomed to engaging in that way. Mallman and Lee (2016) identified how mature learners had to ‘tone down’ their enthusiasm in class for fear of

being laughed at by the traditional undergraduates. The findings would suggest that participants were ‘put off’ engaging in the HE class in a similar manner to FE. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) suggest that colleges need to employ “pedagogy and curricula that speaks directly to the social and life experiences and needs of the non-traditional learner” (p. 13). This is crucial at an early stage in the course because learners are “looking for signs that they do or do not fit in” and suggests a key support is “approachable teaching staff” (p. 12).

### **Labelling - the level 5 learners.**

A key formative event for participants was the first lecture in HE when they were singled out and labelled ‘level 5 learners’ by the lecturer. Wenger (2010) suggests that the trajectory of each individual student incorporates the “memories, competencies, key formative events, stories, and relationships to people and places” and this will influence how they participate and how they learn (p. 5). The stigma of being a ‘level 5’ learner is mentioned by all the school leavers and for some this appeared to have a significant impact on their academic and social integration and the development of their identity as HE learners.

Mallman and Lee (2016) contend that “school leavers have an unwritten but widely shared mode of participation in the classroom”. When the school leavers from the FE college entered the HE college they may have expected to merge with the traditional undergraduates and participate in the same way. They may not have seen themselves as ‘non-traditional’ learners so when they were asked to raise their hands ‘if you are a level 5 student’ they were ‘embarrassed’ and upset with being singled out. Mallman and Lee suggest this stigmatisation serves “to label, explain and socially position the offending

individual” which in this case was to suggest the participants were not real undergraduates. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) identified the “impact of careless words and deeds” in their study of ‘non-traditional’ learners which reflects what happened in this case (p. 12).

In contrast, the mature learners did not seem to be similarly affected, with Tony suggesting he would have said it “in casual conversation to someone anyway”. Keane’s (2015) study of school leaver and mature access students identified a similar finding. The mature students in Keane’s study were happy to tell the other students they had entered college from an access course whereas the school leavers did not want anyone to know because they felt there was a stigma attached to coming from an access programme. Kate’s mention of the ‘back door’ suggests she felt there was a similar stigma attached to entering HE via the FE college.

Guidance would be considered a key professional support for scaffolding transition (Briggs et al., 2012) and as highlighted by Mary is not available to the NAVET learners in the HE college. Other participants highlighted the difficulty with attending support services when having a full FE timetable. Thomas (2012) suggests that adequate provision of support services such as guidance services can influence learners’ “knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners”. She also identifies the importance of institutions providing professional supports through the ‘academic sphere’ rather than relying on learners to access these services autonomously. Having professional supports incorporated into lectures would ensure all undergraduates were able to access them and for this NAVET group, ensures they do not miss out due to timetabling restrictions. Being excluded or unable to attend particular services may make participants feel less ‘legitimate’ in transitioning to university.

### **Too much support in FE?**

There were some suggestions that the teachers in FE were overly supportive which may hinder the development of autonomous and independent learners. Anne's comment 'I just want to do it on my own' suggests she may have felt smothered to some extent in FE and Martin felt he was 'dragged' over the line on some occasions. Rocks and Lavender (2018) highlight the importance of getting the appropriate level of support to help learners acquire the relevant knowledge and develop the necessary skills to successfully transition to HE. This also reflects Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development (ZPD)' theory of learning where each learner should be provided with the amount of support they need to assist their learning while at the same time the 'scaffolding' should be temporary and move in line with the new challenges the learner encounters (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

The challenges learners highlighted include multiple assignments, in multiple formats with multiple deadlines for eight concurrent modules in FE alongside the work allocated in HE. As Tony explains, "some days it felt like there was 12 assignments to do". One of the aims of the bridging programme is to teach learners time management and study skills to enable them to handle the workload. A study by Goldfinch and Hughes (2007) identified confidence in time management and teamwork as key factors for success in first year in college.

It can be sometimes difficult for teachers to decide how much feedback is too much and at what point you stop correcting draft work so that it is a 'real' challenge for the learner. McCarter (2013) suggests that too much support can cultivate a 'learned helplessness' whereby the teacher, in providing supports such as study guides or sample

questions, “inhibits any thinking that the student may have to do for themselves” (p. 70). While we attempt to employ andragogic principles that are led by the needs of the learner, increasingly the emphasis is on outcomes and results and as Martin described it, we may end up ‘dragging’ students over the line.

### **6.3 Belonging or not Belonging**

#### **A ‘sense of belonging’ in FE?**

Entering a new environment is always difficult and being either the only ‘school leaver’ or the only ‘mature learner’ may affect how a person integrates and learns within that community. Class activities, social events and a welcoming environment were some of the elements identified by participants which aided their sense of belonging to the FE community. The importance of having relatable peers was highlighted by both mature and school leaver participants as key to integrating in FE and the importance of peer interaction in learning is reflected in several studies (Hultberg et al., 2009; MacFarlane, 2018; Thomas, 2012). While the mature learners may have expected to be in a class of school leavers in a FE college it is less likely the school leavers expected to be in with several mature learners. Some school leavers mentioned their surprise and concerns when faced with several mature learners in the group (approx. 50/50 split). Mallman and Lee (2016) suggest that “friendships and community cohorts play a large part in one’s ability to imagine a place for oneself in university”.

Several participants identified the support of their FE peers as crucial for them throughout the course and especially when in the HE college. Kate identifies this as her ‘net’ to fall back on. McPhail (2015) emphasises the importance of peers transitioning together for building a sense of ‘connectedness’ or belonging to a college while Fleming



and Finnegan (2011) identify peer support as particularly important for “overcoming challenges, stress and periods of disillusionment” (p. 7). As Elaine points out having the support of the FE group prevented her from ‘running out’ of the first lecture and enabled her to ignore the ‘sniggers’ in the classroom from the traditional undergraduates.

### **A ‘sense of belonging’ in HE?**

The participants’ status as NAVETs may have prevented them from feeling a sense of belonging in the university. Thomas (2012) identifies social integration as a ‘very powerful factor’ in helping students remain and succeed in HE. These participants struggled to form relationships with the traditional undergraduates because of the initial labelling as ‘level 5’ students. Although this could also be due to other factors such as lack of time and only being in college once a week. You could argue that the traditional undergraduates were at a disadvantage in that first lecture. This was a class of approximately 50 people, 20 of whom were coming in from an FE college. It was probably one of the first lectures for all the learners and the traditional undergraduates, who were only starting to get to know each other, were faced with a large group who already knew each other well. The opportunity was there for the lecturer to promote participation and integration by assigning them to different groups both in class and for the group assessment. Thomas (2012) suggests colleges need to “promote peer interaction” to nurture a sense of belonging for the learner (p. 17).

This ‘singling out’ was not a once off occurrence as evidenced by the lack of preparation at induction for the current learners and the restriction of some services such as guidance. The past learners also experienced some negative comments being advised not to “feel pressured to keep up with the other students” because they were level 5 students by

one lecturer and then being “expected to perform to the same standard” by a second lecturer. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) suggest that there are still issues that need to be addressed in HE in Ireland to “meaningfully support non-traditional students and to create fully inclusive and genuinely open third level institutions”. One way of doing this for the NAVET programme would be to ensure learners are not identified as being ‘different’ and are allowed the opportunity and the discretion to decide for themselves when or if they tell the other students of their status as NAVETs.

The current mature learners, as stated previously, were not as adversely affected by the comment and it does not appear to have affected their social integration. Apart from Martin, the mature learners joined clubs and societies and spent time in the library when they could. This contrasts with Keane’s (2015) study where the mature learners did not have the time nor the inclination to socialise in the HE college.

#### ***Downsides of being in a group***

Having an existing peer network from the FE college was also considered a negative by some participants. This community within a community meant there was no ‘need’ to mix (Anne) so they lost out on the opportunity to integrate with the traditional undergraduates and possibly participate more in college life. Keane’s (2015) study highlighted how access students who continued in HE, stuck together rather than branching out and making new friends. This highlights the importance of institutions providing opportunities for integration from first entry to HE (either as access or traditional students) and ensuring a fully inclusive environment for all learners.

**Mixed emotions.**

Christie et al., (2008) identified transition as a process that can involve a sense of “alienation and exclusion, as well as of excitement and exhilaration” (p. 3). The findings in this study support a similar variety of emotions that learners experience in the transition to HE. While the school leavers mention the feelings of alienation and exclusion when the lecturer singled them out in the first lecture as ‘level 5 learners’, the majority of the mature learners remember the ‘experience of being in the university building, on a campus’ and the ‘fantasy’ and ‘glamour’ of university life. Wenger (1998) suggests that for participants to feel legitimate in a community, the community needs to “grant newcomers enough legitimacy so they can be treated as potential members” (p. 101). Being labelled as ‘level 5 learners’ in the first lecture may have prevented the school leavers from feeling like legitimate members of the HE community.

Thomas (2012) highlights the role of the institutions in fostering a sense of belonging and engagement in college life to enable a successful transition. From the findings it would appear the process of entering HE was overshadowed by the participants treatment at induction and in that first lecture. Participants, especially the school leavers, identified feelings of alienation and exclusion from the class and this appears to have impacted their desire to become part of the HE community.

Mallman and Lee (2016) identify how older learners experience “feelings of anxiety about finding a place at university” and this is reflected in Tony’s concerns of how he is perceived by the younger learners on the course. He fears they will think he is “ancient” and a “failure”. He aligns himself to the other mature learners both in the FE college and in HE whom he feels more able to relate to. Fleming and Finnegan (2011)

suggest that mature learners have a “sense of ownership” to the college when there is a “high level of visibility” of mature learners and where there is “numbers of non-traditional students within an institution”. This appears to be the case for the mature learners as they have developed a sense of belonging to the college, have made friends and plan to go there next year.

#### **6.4 A Revised Learner Identity**

The NAVET programme attracts a diverse range of learners from a variety of backgrounds including urban, rural and DEIS schools, early school leavers and mature learners who carry different ‘baggage’ into the course. The baggage includes their previous mixed experiences in both school and higher education, their reasons for choosing the course and the key motivation for all participants which was to become teachers.

According to Conway et al., (2009) people from minority ethnic groups, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and males are under-represented in initial teacher education (ITE) in Ireland with most student teachers following the typical progression route. One of the benefits of this programme is that there are few entry restrictions and it is a direct route into an education degree programme in the HE college. This course is a ‘flexible pathway’ into teacher training to attempt to diversify the teaching profession to reflect the Irish population.

#### **I’m studying what I want to study.**

According to Knowles (1980) adult learners “readiness to learn” is influenced by the relevance of the subject to their personal or professional lives (p. 44). What is evident from the findings is that all the learners wanted to become teachers and the NAVET programme gives them the knowledge and skills to start on the journey to achieve this

goal. It is interesting to note that the four mature learners, who had previous experience in HE, were very definite about their next step. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) identified ‘student resilience’ as the retention factor for non-traditional learners in HE and suggested that those who had previously dropped out or had an “interrupted learning journey” were the most determined.

Anne failed Maths in her Leaving Certificate and when her first choice was no longer available to her, she showed resilience by choosing an alternative route – the NAVET programme. Bandura (1997) identified self-efficacy as “the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Anne wants to go to university and “I don't care like how I get into it”. She has developed self-efficacy and autonomy and understands the purpose of the programme in relation to her future goals. Similarly, Tony is determined to ‘right that wrong’ of failing the last time he was in college and is also determined to move his career forward.

This finding is supported by several studies (Hultberg et al., 2009; Huon & Sankey, 2002; Thomas, 2012) which emphasise the importance of providing a good foundation and understanding of what is expected within a course to enable learners to make an informed decision about their next step. The NAVET programme provides learners with ‘space’ and time to decide on the best route for them.

### **Prepared for HE.**

Christie et al., (2008) refer to the “loss of a secure learning identity” in their study when the students from an FE college entered an elite university and felt a it was a “bewildering and dislocating experience” because they were not familiar with the ‘college

knowledge' (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011). The aim of the NAVET programme is to give learners a 'taste' of university and to provide them with some of the 'college knowledge' they will need to progress to HE.

Two of the modules are purposefully modelled on the modules studied in the HE college and as can be seen by Ivan and Tony's comments help support their understanding of the course content, provides them with the 'language' and a critical understanding of education which assisted them in choosing their next step.

Sanders and Daly (2013) link the loss of identity to the loss of "supportive relationships with staff" which is embedded in the learning practices in FE. The students on the NAVET programme relied heavily on the support still available to them in the FE college and in most cases did not seek the support of the HE teaching staff as identified previously. Having the support in FE may have made them less proactive in seeking support and from this point of view hindered their interaction with the academic staff in HE which may have influenced the development of their learner identity.

### **The elephant in the room.**

It is difficult to know if the labelling as 'level 5 learners' and the subsequent lack of both academic and social integration has impacted the school leavers' identity as potential HE learners. While they have all expressed increased confidence this appears to be down to their improved academic skills and having a better understanding of what is expected at level 8. Sanders and Daly (2013) identified the "the fragility of participants' developing identity as students" in their study of foundation year (FY) students who felt being an FY student meant being considered a "second class student" or not a 'proper' student (p. 50).

By assigning the NAVET learners a separate label, the lecturer suggested they were not ‘proper undergraduates’ which may have damaged their ‘fragile’ learner identity.

## **6.5 Summary**

Overall the bridging programme was a positive experience where participants felt supported and encouraged to participate in the FE college community and became full members of that community.

There were mixed responses in relation to the HE community. Some of the practices in HE, such as the labelling of the participants as ‘level 5 learners’ in the first lecture, may have impacted the academic and social integration for some of the learners and may also have affected their identity as ‘legitimate’ participants in this community. This impact appeared to be more profound for the school leavers on the programme with all mature learners reporting a sense of belonging to the HE college. This may have been aided by their participation in both social and academic events such as societies and workshops.

All the learners felt they had developed confidence and a more positive learner identity. Some participants identified their renewed determination to succeed and a renewed sense of purpose having had a ‘taste’ of university life. They now understood the opportunities tertiary education could provide upon successful completion of the programme and had “developed their own realistic expectations” McPhail (2015) to make an informed choice about their future careers.

## Chapter 7 – Conclusions and Future Perspectives

### 7.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to investigate the transitional experiences of a group of learners on a unique bridging programme between an FE and HE college. FE courses and bridging programmes like the NAVET programme have a role to play in the widening participation agenda. They provide an alternative route into HE for a diverse range of learners including mature learners and those who do not have the formal entry requirements for their chosen undergraduate degree course.

The NAVET programme gives these learners the option of going directly into the BSc in Education or applying through the CAS system to access several other teacher training courses. The students on this programme are reflective of society coming from a variety of backgrounds and educational experiences and with quite a high proportion of males which may help diversify the teaching profession.

The study found that all participants valued the support provided in FE and felt it provided them with the ‘foundation’ for HE and a better understanding of what was expected in university. In general, all participants felt more confident, having developed a variety of academic skills and were better prepared for tertiary education.

There was a significance difference between the transitional experiences for the mature learners and the school leavers. Specifically, the findings suggest that mature learners are more likely to seek professional support when needed in HE whereas the school leavers relied more heavily on the support in FE.

Another significant difference was the effect of being labelled as ‘level 5 learners’ in the HE college had on both cohorts. While the school leavers were upset and annoyed,



it appears to have had less of an impact on the mature learners. This upset may have contributed to the school leavers' decision not to join any clubs or societies and to not seek support which ultimately may have impacted their sense of belonging and learner identity.

## **7.2 Recommendations**

As identified in the literature review and from the findings/discussion in this research, practices that scaffold learners as they transition to higher education still need to be addressed to “create fully inclusive and genuinely open third level institutions” (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011). A critical self-examination by both colleges would help identify the practices that enable or constrain learners and how they engage with the programme. The participants identified some of the issues they encountered when attending the HE college such as no access to guidance and limited access to support services due to a heavy FE/HE timetable. The NAVET programme does not come under the umbrella of the access service in the HE college. These services should be made available to all access programmes, including the NAVET programme, to assist a successful transition for the learner and promote a sense of belonging to the college.

Participants in Sanders and Daly's (2013) study suggested that the teaching staff for foundation courses “should be chosen carefully” and not because of availability. Thomas (2012) also identifies the importance of training staff to develop the capacity to engage learners and to recognise opportunities for engagement in the classroom. This “engagement with the learning community” fosters a sense of belonging to the HE college and promotes a positive learner identity (p. 697). Ensuring the appropriate staff are selected and trained may make a significant impact in supporting transition, the

development of a sense of belonging and a positive learner identity for all learners on the course.

The NAVET learners participate in the same two modules each year in the HE college. NAVETs from the previous year are exempt from those two modules which limits the chances of current NAVETs meeting their previous year's counterparts. One option would be to change the modules open to the NAVETs every second year so that this could happen. Alternatively introducing a mentoring system of previous NAVET learners which facilitates a 'community within a community of learners' may strengthen the new learners' understanding of the practices within the HE community and assist in developing a sense of belonging and identity as a HE learner.

### **7.3 Future Perspectives**

While the focus of this qualitative study was limited to one group of learners' experiences on the NAVET programme valuable insights have been gained which informed the previous set of recommendations. This research also highlighted some issues in relation to the bridging programme that warrant further research which are identified below.

In the last three years of the NAVET programme approximately one third of learners who enrolled at the beginning of the academic year dropped out, usually in the first term. It would be beneficial to capture the experiences of those who may have had a negative experience on the bridging programme and identify some of the reasons why it was unsuccessful for this group of learners. This information would be invaluable for informing an improved programme structure that would enhance the support for the learners to transition successfully.

There is only anecdotal research to show the NAVET programme is a success. The QQI infographics website provides statistics which shows that of the 68% who completed the NAVET programme over the last three years, 86% of those learners obtained the full award which would allow them to progress to HE (QQI, 2019b). However, no definitive tracking information is available to know whether these learners applied for HE, were accepted into HE and are still in/graduated from HE. The collection and study of this data would be relevant for both colleges and for national access statistics.

The findings of this study suggest that school leavers experience the transition from FE to HE differently to mature learners possibly because they do not see themselves as ‘non-traditional’ learners. While there is an abundance of research available on ‘non-traditional’ learners (Christie et al., 2008; Fleming & Finnegan, 2011; MacFarlane, 2018 are some examples) there is a dearth of literature which focuses specifically on school leaver access students such as the NAVETs. This warrants further study given that FE is now a viable route into higher education.

McCarter (2013) identified a culture of ‘learned helplessness’ in American high schools where the teachers provide study aids, sample answers and telling the students exactly what they should learn in preparation for exams. This may be equated to the concept of rote learning prevalent in the Leaving Certificate exams. The concept of ‘learned helplessness’ within the FE environment has not been investigated to my knowledge. This merits further investigation and may assist in teacher training and teacher professional development.

Certainly, more in depth study, both qualitative and quantitative, is necessary to research comprehensively if this NAVET programme is a model that should be promoted for use in other colleges.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A - Research Project Information Leaflet

#### Further Education: Enabling Transitions

#### A study of Learners Experiences on the Education & Training Course in a Further Education College while participating in a Level 8 Degree programme in a 3rd Level College<sup>4</sup>

##### Purpose of the Study

This research project will examine how the E&T - FE/HE Bridging Programme aims to enable the learners to transition and to achieve the success they are looking for. The main objective of the primary research will be to establish what each participant defines as a successful transition.

Through qualitative semi-structured interviews this project will focus on listening to the ‘voices’ of the participants to try and understand what has motivated them to enter the course, what is motivating them to continue and complete the course, their experiences and transitions throughout the course, both positive and negative, and their aspirations on completion.

##### Recruitment

I am looking to interview candidates currently studying on the course and a sample of those who completed the course within the last two years to discuss their experiences.

- The interview will last approximately 30-40 minutes.
- The interview will be recorded and then transcribed.

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<sup>4</sup> The research question was rephrased during the study.

- Respondents do not have to answer any questions that they do not want to.
- The interview script can be amended/deleted on request.
- The interview can be ended or rescheduled at any stage of the process.
- The schedule for the interviews is dependent on availability of the learners however the proposed deadline is mid-March.
- The findings will be based on the interviews. Direct quotes may be used from the transcripts however these will not be identifiable to any one participant.

**Some key information for the respondent:**

**Publication**

This research will be examined as part of my dissertation for a Masters in Learning and Teaching (MALT) in the National College of Ireland, Dublin. It will be presented to the examining board (VIVA) and if successful published online through NCI's library. A hard copy of the research report will also be available there. It may also be published as part of a paper.

**Change of Mind/ Withdrawal**

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

**Confidentiality/Anonymity**

All information included in the research will remain anonymous. All identifiable text will be removed. I will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify any participant.

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. The researcher and academic supervisor will be the only people to have access to the data which is collected. The data will be kept in line with NCI's Data Retention Policy and will then be discarded in a secure manner in line with Data Protection Act (2003) and the new GDPR regulations (2018).

Only the researcher will have access to the audio recordings. They will only be used for educational purposes. After use, they will be deleted from the recording device and folder they are stored in.

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

No potential harmful outcomes are anticipated as a result of participating in the study. However, if you need to speak to somebody during or after the study or if you have any concerns or questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at any stage. Should this research distress you in any way the college guidance counsellor will be available to provide any necessary support.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further

questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Geraldine McElvaney by email:

[x18164102@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:x18164102@student.ncirl.ie)

If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can report them to the ethics committee at the National College of Ireland, Mayor St, Dublin 1. Tel: 1850 221 721

Thank you for reading this information leaflet and I hope to welcome your participation,

Geraldine McElvaney

**Appendix B - Consent to Participate in a Research Study****Further Education: Enabling Transitions****A study of Learners Experiences on the Education & Training Course in a Further Education College while participating in a Level 8 Degree programme in a 3rd Level College**

<b>College:</b>	National College of Ireland, Dublin.
<b>Title of study:</b>	Further Education: Enabling Transitions
<b>Researcher's Name:</b>	Geraldine McElvaney

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to be involved in a research study of learners who are studying on the one-year full-time QQI level 5 Education and Training programme while also studying two Level 8 modules leading to a Level 8 Degree in Education in a 3<sup>rd</sup> Level College.
- We ask that you read the attached Participant Information Leaflet and this Consent Form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of the Study**

This research project will examine how the E&T - FE/HE Bridging Programme aims to enable the learners to transition and to achieve the success they are looking for. The main objective of the primary research will be to establish what each participant defines as a successful transition. The secondary objective will be to examine the success indicators for the providers.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:



- Take part in a **one-to-one interview** with the researcher (which will last approximately 40 minutes).
- Try to answer the research questions to the best of your ability.
- Be willing to have the interview recorded (audio) and your responses used as part of the research study.
- The schedule for the interviews is dependent on your availability however the proposed deadline is mid-March.

### **Publication**

This research will be examined as part of my dissertation for a Masters in Learning and Teaching (MALT) in the National College of Ireland, Dublin. It will be presented to the examining board (VIVA) and if successful published online through NCI's library. A hard copy of the research report will also be available there. It may also be published as part of a paper.

### **Change of Mind/Withdrawal**

All participants are free to change their minds and withdraw from the research at any time, before, during or after the study.

### **Confidentiality/Anonymity**

All information included in the research will remain anonymous. All identifiable text will be removed. The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. The researcher and academic supervisor will be the only people to have access to the data which is collected. Only the researcher will have access to the audio recordings. The data will be kept in line with NCI's Data Retention Policy and will then be discarded in a secure manner in line with Data Protection Act (2003) and new GDPR regulations (2018).

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

No potential harmful outcomes are anticipated as a result of participating in the study. However, if you need to speak to somebody during or after the study or if you have any concerns or questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at any stage. Should this research distress you in any way the college guidance counsellor will be available to provide any necessary support.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Geraldine McElvaney by email: [x18164102@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:x18164102@student.ncirl.ie)

If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can report them to the ethics committee at the National College of Ireland, Mayor St, Dublin 1. Tel: 1850 221 721

**Consent**

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

**Participant's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **(Capitals)**

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **(Capitals)**

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C – Email to Past Students**

Dear Student

My name is Geraldine McElvaney and you would have met me while you were attending Whitehall College in 2016/17 (or 2017/18).

I am currently studying for my Masters in Adult Learning and Teaching at the National College of Ireland (NCI) and have decided to research the Education and Training Programme and the experiences of both current and past students on the course.

This study will focus on listening to your ‘voice’ and those of other past students to get an understanding of: what motivated you to enter the course, what motivated you to complete it, your experiences and transitions throughout the course - both positive and negative, and what you were hoping for on completion.

This is a very exciting opportunity to be involved in the first study of this Education and Training Programme. As part of this research I would like to interview you at a time and place convenient to you. All research data will remain confidential and anonymous.

I am attaching an information leaflet which provides further information. If you are interested in participating, please contact me directly at:

**[x18164102@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:x18164102@student.ncirl.ie)**

I really appreciate you taking the time to read this email and agreeing to participate in the interview process. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Warm Regards

Geraldine McElvaney

## **Appendix D - Semi-Structured Interview Planned Questions**

The following are the topics that will be covered in a semi-structured interview with each of the participants.

### **Question Topics**

#### **General background - age, gender, background, married/single, employed**

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

#### **Educational background/Experiences in School/Motivations**

2. What is your educational background?
3. What was your experience of school? Did your school support you in applying for college?
4. Are you the first in your family to go to college? Did your parents go? Did your family support you in applying for college?
5. How did you hear about the course? What influenced or motivated you to apply for this course?

#### **Expectations/First Impressions/Satisfaction – FE College**

6. How did you feel the first time you came to the FE college?
7. Was there any key moment that stood out for you in the beginning?
8. Was there anything in particular that you found challenging?
9. Did you experience any academic challenges? If yes can you elaborate
10. What, if any, support was available for you? Student/teacher support, peer support, family support
11. Did you experience any social challenges? If yes can you elaborate
12. How did you deal with these challenges?
13. Was there anything in particular that you really enjoyed? Why was that?
14. Was your experience in a further education college what you expected?
15. How would you rate your experience on a scale of 1 to 10? (10 being excellent)
16. Do you feel like you belong in the college?

#### **Expectations/First Impressions/Satisfaction – HE College**

17. How did you feel the first time you went to the university? Was it a good/bad experience?

18. How were the challenges in the university different to further education?
19. How did you integrate with the university students and staff?
20. What, if any, support was available for you? Student/teacher support, peer support, family support
21. Was your experience in a third level college what you expected?
22. How would you rate your experience on a scale of 1 to 10? (10 being excellent)
23. Do you feel like you belong in the college?

#### **Transitions**

24. What were you doing this time last year? Are you happier with where you are at now?
25. How do you feel you have developed as a person since attending college?
26. How do you feel you have developed academically since attending college?
27. Has attending college affected your relationship with your family or friends?
28. What skills do you think you have learned or improved on since starting your course?
29. What helped you in developing these new skills?

#### **Aspirations**

30. What would you like to be doing this time next year?
31. Do you think attending an FE college was of benefit to you for your next step?
32. If you were giving advice to anyone deciding to come on this course, what would it be?

#### **Recommendations**

33. Have you any regrets about coming back to education?
34. What would you like to see change/improve on this course?