

*Educators' Experiences of Quality Assured Assessment in  
the Further Education Sector:*

*Insights from a practice-based innovation, using  
ePortfolios for Assessment*

*Rachael Doherty*

*X20139748*

*Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning*

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National College of Ireland

## Research Students Declaration Form

**Name:** Rachael Doherty

**Student Number:** X20139748

**Degree for which thesis is submitted:** Masters in Educational Practice

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## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
EA	External Authenticator
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
IV	Internal Verification
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
QA	Quality Assurance
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland

## Abstract

Assessment can be used to provide a critical insight into an education system. As the Further Education (FE) sector undergoes a period of transformative change in Ireland, issues such as quality assurance (QA) and technological innovations in assessment have come to the fore. To understand the current assessment landscape, this study aimed to explore experiences of quality assured assessment in the FE sector from the perspective of assessors. Furthermore, the impact of a new ePortfolio system, designed to meet the needs of quality assured assessment in the 21st century was investigated. Through the lens of pragmatic inquiry, a sequential explanatory mixed methods design was employed, across two distinct phases. In phase one an intra-method survey was devised to determine the lived experience of assessors and to capture current trends in assessment practice. A focus group in phase two allowed for a deeper examination of these issues, while also specifically investigating the impact of the ePortfolio system. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics whereas qualitative results were explored using thematic analysis, allowing for rich, deep insights. Findings demonstrated that educators value quality and processes that promote it. However, differences emerged in how assessors felt about the approach to QA. Defensive QA experiences lead to administrative box-ticking, low assessor confidence and concerns regarding consistency of standards. In contrast, prospective QA experiences were found to be motivating and collaborative for educators, leading to improvements in practice. The use of technology supported assessment, with benefits including streamlining of processes. The ePortfolio was found to reduce administrative burden, support practices to improve consistency in standards and increase student autonomy. This research makes a valuable contribution to the academic discourse regarding quality in assessment and may inform the development of progressive assessment practice and policy in the sector, whilst enhancing the student experience.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Quality in the Further Education system has become a hot topic. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the national body responsible for promoting quality has just begun a historic inaugural review of education providers in the sector, solidifying quality assurance's ascent to prominence on the Further Education agenda. QQI is also the sectors awarding body, providing recognised qualifications and certification to learners based on their achievement of appropriate standards in assessment. This makes the fair and consistent assessment of learners a critical aspect of providers' quality assurance (QA) systems. Educators, acting in their capacities as assessors are a key party in quality assuring assessment. Assessors are responsible for the effective design, implementation and marking of assessments, and serve as the bridging link between the QA processes of assessment and authentication of learner portfolios. However, the details of how they view and experience these processes are extremely limited. In order to promote and ensure quality in assessment going forward, a clearer picture of current and evolving practices in the sector is now required, and it is hoped that this research will address some of the gaps in this important area.

In this chapter, I will explain the background and rationale of the research, framing it within the context of what is currently known in the academic literature and what is understood by practitioners working in the sector. The relevance of my own positionality in the design, execution and interpretation of the study is discussed, as is the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has acted as a recent change accelerator in educational practice (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). The potential impact of this research and its possible benefits will be explored. In addition, a brief overview of the study aims and the methodological approach will be provided. Finally, the structure of the dissertation, and the chapters that follow this one will be outlined.

## Background and Rationale

The Further Education (FE) sector in Ireland serves a diverse cohort of learners on a wide range of courses from Level 1 to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Provision of further education services is delivered by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), meaning that it is well positioned to serve individual, community and regional needs. Since the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), SOLAS and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) were established in 2012/13, the sector has been undergoing a period of transformative change. The first ever National Further Education and Training strategy was published in 2014, followed by its sequel in 2020. The first Strategy document outlined five strategic goals for the sector. One of these was “Quality Provision”, which aimed to ensure that the sector was providing high quality education and training programmes that would meet national and international quality standards (SOLAS, 2020a). As progress continues at pace, the process of assessment, which is known to be central to effective teaching, learning and quality of education has also moved into sharp focus (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2018).

## Quality Assuring Assessment in Further Education

Assessment in the Further Education System is criterion-referenced, with certification of awards based on a student’s achievement of stated learning outcomes. The educators who teach on further education programmes also act as assessors, playing an essential role in the providers assessment processes. This process involves the production of a portfolio of assessment by each learner, in response to assessments designed and marked by the assessor. The portfolio of evidence is compiled for each individual learner before subsequent paperwork is added by the assessor in advance of the authentication process. As QQI issues certification on the basis of learner performance in assessments that vary in their design and marking from assessor to assessor, the assessment principles of validity and reliability must be carefully upheld. To ensure compliance with quality assurance requirements, providers must implement internal verification and external authentication to confirm that learner assessments are fair, reliable and valid (QQI, 2018).

Assessors must prepare all learners' portfolios for these processes, which are then examined on a sampling basis. Research published in 2017, provided a rare snapshot of how Irish educators view quality assurance (Fitzsimons, 2017). This research highlighted clear issues with the functioning of the system from the perspectives of educators who viewed quality assurance processes as contradictory, subjective and administratively onerous. This study and its findings provided the motivation to further examine the views of assessors in these areas.

A dialogue regarding improvements in assessment and quality has already begun; for example, in 2018, QQI published a Green Paper on Assessment in Further and Higher Education to identify areas of concern and to posit options for enhancement of the process (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2018). Responses to this consultation document were also submitted by 77 stakeholders who expressed opinions on how policy and practice in this area can be improved (Banks, 2019). However, as with all aspects of education, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a new lens through which to examine the process of assessment (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2020). Rapid changes to assessment practices were required across the sector during the pandemic to facilitate more flexible ways of assessing learners while also ensuring the fairness and integrity of awards and standards were upheld. In addition, many assessors were required to present student portfolios for authentication digitally for the first time. This short period of rapid change has led to a renewed examination of the fitness for purpose of traditional assessment processes and practices and allowed for the potential of more innovative approaches. In response to this, I initiated the development of a new ePortfolio system for quality assured assessment, that has now been piloted by a wider cohort of assessors. This pilot project will hereafter be referred to as "the ePortfolio project". This period of accelerated change makes this a fitting and valuable time to explore educators' experiences of assessment, the QA processes that govern it and the role that technology can and does play in improving quality practices in this area.

## Research Origin

This research originated from the alignment of multiple factors in recent times. These factors include the recent focus in the sector on the issues of quality, technological innovation and professional development. The recent focus on these areas is being driven by the national FET strategy (SOLAS, 2020a), and the significant organisational reform of the sector that began a decade ago and that continues today.

However, the spark that ignited the study came from the accelerated change and innovation that I was observing and experiencing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions it placed on long established practices. Practices that had gone unquestioned for decades were now up for review and while the majority of the changes to assessment were introduced as reactive emergency measures, many of them had been proposed and promoted prior to the pandemic. For example, a report published in February 2020 in the United Kingdom concluded that assessment processes needed a significant technological overhaul by 2025 (JISC, 2020). However, the previously untapped potential of technology for assessment is now being realised more rapidly and this research intends to capture assessors' views and experiences on how technology can now support assessment into the future.

Finally, this research has of course been influenced by my own interests and experiences. Researcher positionality is an important consideration in social research, particularly in relation to qualitative studies (Darwin Holmes, 2020). It is concerned with the world views of the researcher, including their own ontological and epistemological assumptions, values and beliefs. Both my professional and personal background have in part guided me towards this research area of interest. They will also inevitably influence all aspects of the research process itself. I have personally spent most of my adult life as a student, with a wealth of positive and negative experiences giving me an important perspective from the viewpoint of a learner. I have a previous background in scientific research, which allowed me to develop my strong interest in evidence based learning and continuous development and improvement. I brought this interest with me, as I took a change in

professional direction over five years ago, when I became an educator in the Further Education sector. I have therefore performed the role of an assessor and experienced the assessment processes that I endeavour to learn more about during this research. This year I, like my colleagues worked through the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and assessing students remotely. During this time I adapted assessment strategies, re-examining their fitness for purpose, and immersing myself in educational technology, teaching myself new and innovative ways to assess students. This included the co-design of a new ePortfolio system built with the aim of supporting assessment and authentication processes into the future. I believe that the global pandemic has provided an important opportunity for us all to reflect and reassess the process of assessment.

### Research Purpose

The study aims to contribute to a better understanding of current and evolving assessment practice and process in the sector, from the perspective of assessors. The research is grounded in the pragmatic paradigm, due to its focus on producing actionable outcomes, based on understanding and knowledge, that are practically relevant as well as informed by theory (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). In order to achieve these aims, a sequential mixed method research design was identified as the most suitable methodological approach. An overview of the methodological approach is outlined below in Figure 1.1.

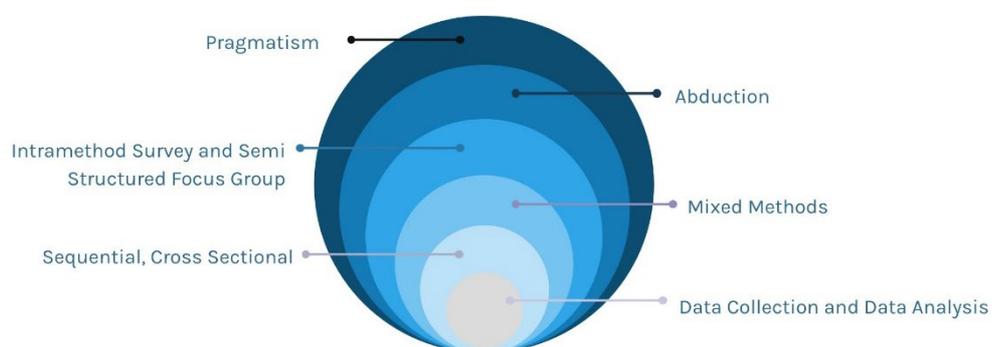


Figure 1.1 Overview of research methodology, created using Saunders “Research Onion” framework (Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, 2007)

The research is divided into 2 distinct phases. The first phase is designed to understand educators' views and experiences of the assessment process, its associated quality assurance measures and how technology can play a role in this regard. An intra method online survey will be used to capture the voices and opinions of assessors across the sector. The results of this were analysed using descriptive and basic inferential statistics as well as Braun & Clarke's (Braun et al., 2019) thematic analysis (TA). The second phase is designed to further examine the key issues for assessors that were raised in phase one. A small focus group of assessors currently engaging in the ePortfolio project will be convened, to allow a deeper exploration of themes and opportunities for the future (Dahlin Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). It will also consider the potential of electronic portfolios in enhancing the quality assured assessment processes in Further Education into the future.

This research is important for several reasons. It will extend knowledge and understanding of assessment by focusing on two rapidly developing influencing factors; namely, quality assurance and technology. While great change is afoot in both areas, there has been very little opportunity for relevant discourse involving the professionals at the crux of assessment (QQI, 2018), the assessors themselves. By examining assessment through this lens, it is envisaged that the findings from this study will provide practical opportunities for quality enhancement in the system. It also has a broad potential to directly impact policy across the entire Further Education sector, at a time when more co-ordinated and integrated planning is viewed as necessary for future provision (SOLAS, 2020a). While the scope extends across Further Education nationally, an important distinction is that the findings herein do not apply to the training services in the sector, which currently remains under a separate legacy system for quality assurance. However, as providers are currently developing common policies and procedures that will apply to both their further education and training services, this research may prove useful in understanding the current landscape across Further Education context.

## Outline of Dissertation

This dissertation is organised into five chapters. Following from this introduction, a critical review of contextual and relevant literature will be presented, concluding with the statement of the central research question. The third chapter will outline the research design and provide a clear rationale for the methodological approach pursued. Details relating to the research participants and sampling are also included. Results from the two research phases are outlined and discussed in a linear style in the fourth chapter. Phase one findings are presented first, providing a broad overview of quality assured assessment processes from the perspectives of assessors. This includes discussion of key themes from the survey, supported by additional quantitative findings. Following this, are the results and discussion relating to phase two. These findings, from the small focus group provide deeper and more specific insights based on the themes from phase one, all of which were explored through the lens of moving forward, finding solutions, and specifically examining the potential of how ePortfolios could impact these areas in the future. In the fifth and final chapter, the overall findings are interrogated, in order to fully explore how they have addressed the central research question. This will include the limitations of this study and areas where additional research is required. It will also outline recommendations for policy and practice in this rapidly evolving area.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided a concise overview of the background and rationale for this study, how the research will be conducted and how it is to be presented in this dissertation. The research is placed in context, with reference to both current policy and practice as well as the limited existing academic literature that is relevant to the topics being explored. My own positionality, as a teacher, assessor, researcher and student is discussed, and the significant influence of the social and environmental factor of the COVID-19 pandemic on this study is acknowledged. The specific aims and objectives have been outlined and the potential value and impact of this research, within its limited scope described. Finally, the structure of the dissertation is outlined, providing a clear roadmap for navigation through this and all subsequent chapters.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

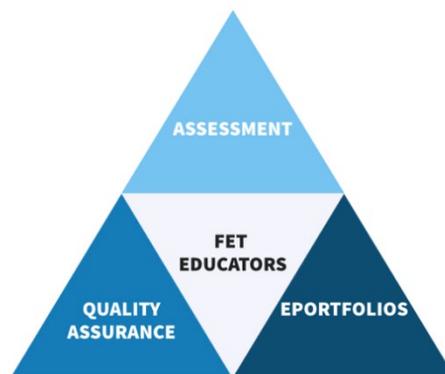
### Introduction

As a sector, Further Education (FE) is undergoing a period of transformative change in Ireland. There are multiple factors at play; most of which have been born out of the sectors ongoing structural reform programme. This reformation involved the establishment of the ETBs, a new Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) and Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (QQI); all within the last decade. The first national FET strategy was published in 2014, with its successor document launched in 2020 by the first Minister assigned to the new department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Skills. This document identifies 4 enabling themes which will require immediate focus “in order to deliver real reform, integration and performance improvement” in the sector at this time (SOLAS, 2020a). One of these enabling factors is “Digital Transformation”, which involves the embedding of modern digital practices and solutions. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting realities faced by educators globally has accelerated the progress in this area at a pace that has yet to be fully realised. Another of these four enabling factors is “Staffing, Capabilities and Structures”. In this context, quality assurance structures are identified as being “fundamental to developing curricula, teaching and learning, assessment, maintaining standards and enhancing quality” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 56). Significant progress in developing programme providers quality assurance is acknowledged while it also states that the quality assurance practices “across ETBs and other service providers must continue to be prioritised”.

As a current practitioner working in the Further Education system, it is clear that these areas of Quality Assurance and Technology are also “hot topics” for educators working on the ground. They appear to be major influencers in the current evolution of practices and new demands in the sector. In an extensive survey, published as part of the sectors first Professional Development strategy in 2017, they were also the two areas that educators were least confident about, out of a list of nineteen functions relevant to their roles (SOLAS, 2017). This is of particular relevance to me

in my professional context, having recently conceptualised and co-developed a new ePortfolio model, to support the process of quality assured assessment in the FE sector. In designing this practice-based, technological innovation, I have strived to apply my knowledge and experience as both an assessor and a researcher to embed the ePortfolio design with best practice in terms of quality assurance and the innovative use of technology. The research explored in this dissertation will also focus on both of these key areas.

In order to make practical improvements, it is important to first understand the reality of how the processes governing assessment are experienced and valued on the ground. Subsequently, armed with this new information, I aim to further explore these findings and specifically explore how the implementation of the new ePortfolio system for quality assured assessment has impacted on this process from the perspective of a group of educators who will have participated in its first phase of rollout. This literature review aims to comprehensively examine assessment in FE, in this context (Figure 2.1). In order to do this it will be necessary to examine how, as a sector, we have arrived at this particular juncture, before exploring the discourse that currently surrounds 21<sup>st</sup> century assessment policy and practice in FE.



*Figure 2.1 Research project central themes from the perspective of FET educators*

## Background and Context

The Irish further education and training sector has had a chaotic and at times colourful evolution. Its roots can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when a Commission on

Intermediate Education criticised the predominantly church run school curriculum for being too academic and that as a result of this and other factors, there was a lack of appropriate and necessary vocational skills in the population (Hogan, 1986). The foundation of the State saw technical education come under the control of the Department of Agriculture, but it was transferred to the Department of Education in 1924. At this time there were 65 technical schools, providing courses in highly specific areas, largely agriculture for men and domestic science and crafts for women (McGuinness et al., 2014). In the 1930s the Vocational Education Act established the 38 Vocational Education Committees (VECs). Their role was to provide and manage technical education for students aged 14 to 16. During this time, the Apprenticeship Act also set up apprenticeship committees, made up of employers and employees, as well as Ministerial nominees to oversee training (Lewis & Kellaghan, 1987).

Ireland's new membership of the European Economic Commission played a critical role in shaping the sector (O'Sullivan, Denis, 2005). In the late 1970s, the European Social Fund (ESF) provided funding for post-junior certificate courses to provide social, general and technical education with a relevant work experience component. These courses would evolve to become what are currently referred to as Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. The 1980's, a period of protracted recession and high unemployment rates in Ireland saw the development of new programme offerings such as Youthreach, aimed at early school leavers, and Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), for adults over 21 years old who had been unemployed for a year or more. FÁS was also established as Ireland's Training and Employment Authority in 1987 and given responsibility for offering and managing training courses and apprenticeships. Interestingly, the term 'further education' was not used until 1995, when a chapter of a Department of Education and Science White Paper was devoted to its positioning and development (Department of Education and Science, 1995). This document also outlined the approved plans for the establishment of both a Further Education Authority and a National Certification Authority.

Due to the haphazard way in which the vocational sector evolved, the courses very often fell outside the system of established qualifications (Granville, 2003) and as a result, consistency and standardisation of assessment and certification was lacking. In 1991, the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established to provide certification and this was later subsumed by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) as well as the FÁS and CERT certification systems that were established in 1999 under the National Qualifications Act Ireland. Whilst this brought a greater level of regulation and specification to assessment processes, some programmes, particularly those in Community Education courses, offered non-FETAC accreditation including City & Guilds, ITEC, BTEC and Microsoft. For example, in 2012, non-FETAC accreditation accounted for almost 30 per cent of total certification in that year (McGuinness et al., 2014). In 2012, after a particularly turbulent decade for the sector, including scandals relating to assessment practices that saw FETAC refusing to issue certificates to students (*Fetac Awards on Hold until Audit*, 2010), the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act was passed into law. This saw FETAC disbanded and its remit transferred to the new statutory awarding body for further and higher education called QQI. The Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland now serves a diverse cohort of learners on a wide range of courses from Level 1 to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The sector includes a diverse range of educational programmes and training services including Apprenticeships, Community and Adult Education, Post Leaving Cert (PLC) courses, Prison Education and Youthreach as well as Literacy and Numeracy Services. FET courses are primarily delivered by the sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs), however, other providers also include some private institutes and online colleges. meaning that it is well positioned to serve individual, community and regional needs.

Current assessment policy and practices are determined internally by local programme providers such as the ETBs; where a large amount of autonomy has been divested to local level. However, external guidelines developed and published by QQI are fundamental and common to all providers, and must be considered by providers when developing their internal quality assurance

procedures (QQI, 2016, 2018). Contemporary quality systems in the field of education and the specific quality assurance measures that apply in Further Education are discussed in detail later in this review. Before this however, it is important to fully explore and evaluate the underpinning assessment principles and practices in the sector and the current discourse that surrounds them.

### Assessment in a Contemporary Further Education System

As stated by Rowntree (1987), 'if we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must first look to its assessment procedures' (p. 1). In Ireland, the dominance of a high stakes summative culture means that the space for discussion about assessment and its reform by teachers has been slow to emerge. In the mainstream school system, particularly at Second Level, assessment is most often viewed and experienced as a summative judgement, whereas its role in supporting learning and teaching takes a much less prominent position. Grading in this system follows a norm-referenced model, which is considered appropriate when assessments are being primarily used to identify a certain number of examinees (Turnbull, 1989). This culminates with the pinnacle of relative, norm-referenced assessment in Ireland; the Leaving Certificate. Grades from these terminal examinations are primarily used to select the highest scorers for admissions to higher education programmes in the state.

In contrast, assessment in the Further Education System is based on principles of assessment that support a more learner-centred, constructivist model of education (Cedefop - European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training., 2015). Criterion referenced assessment of learning outcomes is the sole framework used for judging student evidence. This system is concerned with the learner's individual demonstration of knowledge, skill, and competence, rather than their relative performance (Burkett, 2018). John Biggs, who is responsible for one of the main theoretical underpinning of outcomes-based curriculum; the model of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2015); has explained the benefits of criterion-referenced assessment over norm-referenced assessment. Criterion-referenced assessment allows a grade to more authentically reflect a student's learning, regardless of the relative performance of others (Biggs, 2011).

Certification of further education programmes is based on the achievement of stated learning outcomes rather than on coverage of centrally defined syllabi. Therefore, a crucial requirement of the further education assessor is “the capacity to analyse learners’ needs, to develop a programme of study in response to those needs and to assess learner progress” (Teaching Council, 2011). This flexibility and responsiveness is a crucial and relatively unique feature of assessment in the Further Education sector compared to other educational models. However, one important consideration that is required to ensure that criterion-referenced assessment is reliable is that if criteria are ambiguously worded, they are open to different interpretations by assessors (Burton, 2006). As QQI issues the same certification for learners who are subject to assessments and marking schemes that vary from assessor to assessor, this is an important issue when it comes to the balancing of the six assessment principles (see Figure 2.2) than underpin QQI’s guidelines for quality assuring assessment in the sector (QQI, 2018). In fact, in a consultation paper published in 2018, QQI acknowledged that under the current system, the responsibilities on Further Education providers to provide assessment that is consistently valid and reliable for the purposes of certification, as well as for the allocation of college places, may be unrealistic (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2018).

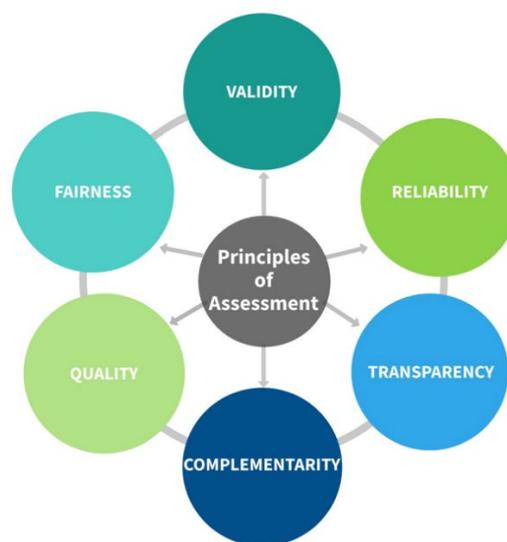


Figure 2.2 Principles of Assessment as outlined by QQI guidelines for the Further Education sector

## The Issue of Validity and Reliability

A valid assessment in its most traditional sense has been defined as an assessment that “measures what it purports to measure” (Gipps, 1994). As a more contemporary concept it can be defined as a test that “faithfully reflects the level of achievement or skill that it is designed to measure” Broadfoot, (2007, p180). In addition to this, the term “predictive validity” has been used to describe the likelihood that an assessment can predict future behaviours (Falchikovab, 2013). This is particularly relevant in vocational education programmes where student skills development and practical capacity to act, as well as to know, is of vital importance. However, in order for this assessment principle to be lived out, assessors require a level of expertise to accurately judge these levels of achievement. Grading of highly valid assessments also requires a system that has trust in individual assessor’s judgements and that acknowledges a degree of subjectivity exists as a result. This concept of validity has been described as being under “tension” with another assessment principle, that of reliability (Wiliam, 2001).

Reliability deals with the levels of accuracy and consistency of assessment. This could be in relation to its consistency across different times, geographic locations and assessors among other variables. As a principle, reliability in assessment is particularly important from the viewpoint of providing fair and quality assured certification processes. However, studies have revealed issues with marker reliability in practice and have questioned the very notion of moderation (Bloxham, 2009). Johnson (2013) also notes that lack of clarity and applicability of assessment criteria also leads to unreliability in an assessment system. In particular, for highly valid, complex assessment tasks, it can be very difficult to test with a high degree of reliability (Broadfoot, 2007). While it may be argued from purely positivist position that without reliability, there can be no validity (Elton & Johnston, 2002), it is widely accepted that a balance must be struck between these two principles when it comes to their practical application (Earle, 2020; Wiliam, 2003), and this remains an area requiring further research and the adoption of innovative practices to overcome. One obvious approach to increase assessment reliability is to introduce more standardised tests or examinations.

However, prioritising this above all other assessment principles would inevitably lead to a more rigid assessment process that is at odds with the learner-centred, authentic vocational based teaching and assessment that the FE sector espouses. A two-pronged approach, whereby a centrally devised examination is included alongside locally devised assessments is one suggested strategy that could be adopted to 'resolve the tension' in vocational education settings (CEDEFOP, 2015, p. 67). While there is very limited information and research available about the application of these principles and the overall quality of assessment in the Irish FE system, some knowledge can be inferred from findings relating to higher education institutes and vocational systems in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, from which the Irish sector has often taken its lead (Geaney, 1998) and to which it is heavily aligned.

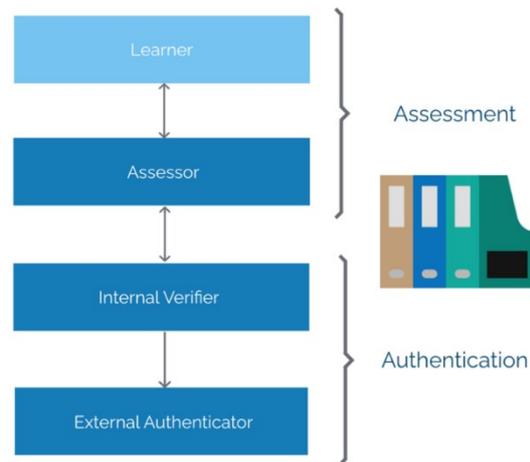
### Quality Assuring Assessment

Even the defining of Quality in Education is contentious. Who decides which practice is best and what conflicting principles of assessment should be prioritised? Quality assurance (QA) is a term generally used to describe the processes that seek to ensure that the learning environment, including teaching and assessment, reaches an acceptable threshold of quality. QA is also described by Irelands regulatory authority QQI as the enhancement of education and training provision and the standards attained by learners (QQI, 2016)). Across Europe, QQI also link with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, and the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) network (Fitzsimons, 2017), in a collaborative approach to policy. This convergence in European policy originated with intergovernmental agreements via the Bologna and Copenhagen declarations; to work towards enhanced cooperation in quality assurance, with the lesser-known Copenhagen process (2002) applying specifically to the vocational education sector (European Commission, 2004).

In Further Education in Ireland, quality assurance is the responsibility of providers (QQI, 2016). To ensure that effective measures are employed, QQI provide best practice guidelines from which internal QA policies and procedures can be designed and implemented. The QQI guidelines

relating to quality assuring assessment outline the key stages of the process; including assessment itself, the process of authentication as well as the management of results, appeals and the requesting of QQI certification for learners (QQI, 2018). Across the sector, courses from Level 1 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications are internally assessed by the educators who teach the programme modules. These educators therefore fulfil an essential role in the providers assessment process. As described by QQI, 2018, the authentication process takes place, “to ensure fairness, consistency and validity of assessment” and to “ensure that QQI receive accurate and quality assured learner results”.

The authentication process must include internal verification (IV) and external authentication (EA). The role of the internal verifier is to systematically check that the provider’s assessment procedures have been applied and to verify the accuracy of assessment results. This includes double checking that marks have been calculated correctly, that the assessment technique used matches that in the descriptor and that the relevant QA paperwork is present. Conversely, internal verification is not concerned with moderation of results and does not mean that assessors’ judgments are verified. The determination of whether assessment material is in line with national standards is the role of the external authenticator. QQI (2018) state that the external authenticator “provides confirmation of fair and consistent assessment of learners in accordance with national standards” and “ensures that assessment results have been marked in a valid and reliable way”. This is carried out by an independent professional, who is appointed by the provider. An overview of the processes of assessment and authentication are outlined below in Figure 2.3.



*Figure 2.3 Overview of Further Education Assessment Processes as outlined by QQI guidelines on Quality Assuring Assessment*

Clearly, an important aspect of quality assurance processes is to ensure there is proper accountability and meeting of standards (El-Khawas, 2007). While accountability is crucial to ensure confidence and credibility in the system, it is important that this culture of monitoring does not come into conflict with the promotion of quality teaching, learning and assessment (Jessop et al., 2012). Studies have found that the perceptions of QA held by those working in education are vital for the perceived effectiveness of the internally or externally mandated measures and the commitment of staff (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). For example, clear support from senior management has been shown to be correlated with a greater perception of quality assurance effectiveness in the eyes of quality managers. In contrast, negative correlations were found when quality assurance was perceived as either an administrative burden or a mechanism associated with the sanctioning of staff (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Jones and Saram (2006) have argued that teachers' attitude towards quality assurance can be improved by staff empowerment and involvement in embracing the quality culture. When this is not the case, Mcinnis (2010) argues that teachers may feel that other stakeholders are not concerned about "on the ground" practices, which might hinder their teaching.

A 2009 study examined the way in which lecturers experience different quality management systems that have been implemented in third level institutions the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Analysis of forty interviews across both countries found that while staff could clearly see the benefits of a quality system, the general sense was that in its current form, the system did not align with their work (Teelken & Lomas, 2009). Educators were also found to be concerned about the use of quality assurance systems to elicit control over them and their work. This appears to be a common thread identified in multiple studies of quality assurance systems in education where it can often be seen as a rigid regulatory system rife with bureaucracy (Cardoso et al., 2019; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; Tavares et al., 2016).

In an attempt to capture the multiple realities of its implementation, various models or conceptions of Quality Assurance have been described in the literature (Biggs, 2001; Cardoso et al., 2015; Goff, 2017). An example of this is the differentiation of two approaches by John Biggs (2001), which he referred to as retrospective and prospective models of quality assurance. As the term suggests, QA that is retrospective in nature looks back at what has already been done, while also moderating and making judgments against external standards. As explained by Biggs, (2001) one source of retrospective QA came via the Thatcher Government's demands in the United Kingdom for accountability, and the establishment of a new framework. The retrospective QA system that still dominates the Higher Education sector in the United Kingdom has also been described as a system of "one-way accountability" (Hoecht, 2006), conducted with a managerial agenda that can damage trust and that may well be detrimental to innovative teaching and learning (Biggs, 2001). In contrast, prospective quality assurance is forward looking, progressive and based on a culture of enhancement, via self-reflection and action (Biggs, 2001).

Upon initial drafting of this literature review, the only published research in which the opinions of Irish educators have been explored in relation to quality assurance was published in 2017 and featured the voices of adult educators (Fitzsimons, 2017). This investigation took the form of a short survey, which asked 3 quantitative and 2 open ended questions in total. While this survey

was open to educators in further and higher education, most respondents worked in the further education sector. This valuable research identified differing views among practitioners about how the quality assurance systems should function. The study found that educators had experiences that were both positive and negative of internal verification and external authentication, both of which are key processes in Quality Assuring Assessment in the sector. This research by Fitzsimons (2017), highlighted clear issues with the experience and functioning of the system from the perspectives of educators, with 64% of respondents identifying with the retrospective model of QA. Views of QA processes as contradictory, subjective, administratively heavy and a “tick box” exercise were also identified. There were also conflicting views expressed regarding the role QA plays in ensuring consistent standards. Some educators were supportive of QA in this regard, whereas others were opposed to the notion of uniformity, viewing it as being in direct conflict with the disparate and localised nature of adult education. Underlying these viewpoints was a recurring subtheme; that despite the QA infrastructure in place, consistent and uniform standards were not being achieved. This is exceptionally relevant to my research as it supports my understanding of how QA is generally viewed and experienced by educators in the sector. However, a clear constraint here was the limited number of questions in the survey for participants to respond to. As a scoping study, the findings uncovered raise some important and relevant questions about the system upon which assessment integrity is built and maintained, and these finding clearly require further investigation.

In recent weeks, the publication of research relating to the perceptions of QA in an Irish Higher Education context is a welcome addition to the scant academic literature in this area nationally. Similar to international studies (Cardoso et al., 2019; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018), this research found that there are varied and subjective perceptions of QA in Irish Higher Education institutes, often based on the specific roles played by participants, including management, administration and academic staff (Twomey, 2020). While 73% of staff had generally positive view of QA, 54% of staff viewed it as being associated with accountability rather than improvement. One of

this study's main findings was that an integrated approach to QA is required that balanced both the needs for managerial accountability and academic quality (Twomey, 2020).

## Portfolios in Education

The word portfolio is derived from the Italian word *portafoglio*, with *porta* meaning to carry and *foglio* meaning loose sheets of paper (Lam, 2018). Portfolios crossed over from art to education during the early 1970s. They first appeared in higher education in response to a move away from standardised testing, an increased focus on quality assurance and new constructivist theories of learning (Farrell, 2018), including Dewey's reflective learning and Meizrow's theory of transformational learning (Eynon et al., 2014; Stansberry & Kymes, 2007) These approaches are clearly evident in the use of portfolios to capture the construction and process of learning and the act of reflection that occurs through the creation of the artefact (Farrell, 2020).

Portfolios for the particular purpose of assessment have been used to allow students to produce a showcase of their assessment journey, allowing for the compilation of examples of their best work and providing an antithesis to traditional, standardized assessment that did not adequately capture student skills and achievements Barrett, 2008). It seems that the alignment of these features with the theoretical underpinnings and practical workings of the assessment process in the Irish further education mean that portfolios for assessment found a natural home in the sector and have remained the sole method of presentation of assessment evidence to this day.

## Portfolio Assessment in the Further Education Sector

As discussed previously, the system of vocational training and further education system in Ireland is heavily influenced by practices across the Irish sea. In the UK, an awarding body called NCVQ, set up in 1989, which was responsible for overseeing National Vocational Awards (NVQ), went about designing very specific criteria that education programmes must meet for the award to be recognised as an NVQ. As part of this design process, a very distinctive set of assessment principles was applied and portfolio assessment was introduced, making it the central technique for

nationally recognised assessment in the sector (Wolf, 1998) This system was designed to have an “exhaustive” assessment process, with teachers and students being required to keep detailed and extensive records, and being responsible for the storage of assessment evidence and documentation (Wolf, 1998). Indeed, portfolio assessment in the vocational context has been described as being time consuming in nature and administratively challenging (Wagner, 1998; Wolf, 1998) . However, the development of the NVQ system in the UK was designed with specific learner-centred, constructivist pedagogical underpinnings that aligned perfectly with portfolio assessment (Jessup, 1991). This involved a new emphasis on student autonomy and empowerment that was at odds with traditional educational models (Bates et al., 1998), that still remains a focus of vocational education to this day (CEDEFOP, 2015).

As well as their stated benefits for assessment, portfolios had an additional advantage, as they facilitated the quality process put in place by the NCVQ. This quality system featured internal and external verifiers, who among other things were tasked with ensuring that all assessors’ records and students’ assessment evidence could be viewed and checked. It was clear that portfolios were the obvious and, in many ways, the sole possible choice for assessment if the pedagogical and quality approaches were to be supported (Eraut et al., 1996).

“NVQ assessment and quality assurance is dominated by paperwork. ... NVQs typically involve over a thousand separate assessment decisions ... The need to record all these decisions, together with some indication of the evidence on which they were based, helps to explain the almost universal adoption of the portfolio system for storing assessment information” (Eraut et al., 1996, p.8).

In the Irish FE sector, contemporary practice remains very similar to what has been outlined above in relation to the British system in the 1990s, involving the production of a portfolio of assessment by each learner which also supports the functioning of the quality system. In the Irish Further Education context, the portfolio can be described as a collection of assessment evidence, produced by the learner, that demonstrates their knowledge, skill and competence in relation to a

set of a learning outcomes, which is marked and graded by the assessor (QQI, 2018). After grading, assessors are responsible for the presentation of portfolios of assessment for every learner, in every module they assess, for internal verification and external authentication. Practical experience indicates that portfolios of assessment are still predominantly presented in physical, paper-based format. External authenticators make site visits, during which they are provided with boxes of folders, filled with assessment evidence and QA documentation, with cover sheets glued to the front. In some cases, physical boxes of folders are also couriered to different geographical locations to facilitate feasible authentication. In recent years, particularly since remote teaching and assessing has come to the fore due to the COVID-19 pandemic, individual assessors have begun the transition to presenting student evidence in a variety of electronic formats, across multiple digital platforms. At NFQ Levels 4 and above, it is identified in some local documentation that the student should compile their own portfolios, with some support from the assessor at Levels 1 – 3. Regardless of the exact means by which they are compiled, portfolios of assessment remain a mainstay for students and assessors across all modules and programmes delivered by FE providers nationally.

### ePortfolios in Education

The Web 1.0 digital revolution of the 1990s saw the emergence of electronic portfolios (Eynon et al., 2014). One of the pioneers in the development of ePortfolio in Higher Education was Helen Barrett. Their use allows for the clear tracking of learners' accomplishments over a sustained period (Barrett, 2007). In general terms, Barrett outlined two major purposes of ePortfolios in education being the capture of either the process or the product of learning, teaching and assessment (Barrett, 2010); thereby continuing the conceptualisation of traditional portfolios from the 1980s and 1990s. As the use of ePortfolio became more widely adopted in the last 20 years, educators have started to research ePortfolio assessment and government policy in some countries have supported its adoption and promotion (Hallam & Creagh, 2010). Providing evidence that demonstrates the wide and varied uses of ePortfolio in education, Farrell found that seventeen different definitions of ePortfolio were used in published research literature for the period 2000 –

2010 (Farrell, 2020). This is because the exact definition or purpose of an ePortfolio is usually highly specific to its context.

The use of ePortfolios for assessments in the Irish education sector has gained some traction in recent years, with recent publications exploring their use in both the second level (Poole et al., 2018) and higher education settings (Farrell, 2018). In both cases, several advantages and barriers were identified. However, unlike second level and higher education, FE providers already exclusively use portfolios of assessment. In addition, ePortfolios also support the presentation of work in a wide variety of formats; for example, videos, reflective journals and imagery (Barrett, 2010), all of which are commonly used assessment methods in FE. These characteristics make FE a particularly appropriate setting to investigate the impact that ePortfolios may bring to the assessment process.

#### The ePortfolio Project

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was involved in the design and development of an ePortfolio template, designed to meet the needs of assessment practices and processes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with quality assurance at its core. Due to the contextually specific nature of ePortfolios, the structure and function of this system, which is explored in this study, needs to be explicitly stated. The ePortfolio was built in Microsoft OneNote, which functions as a digital binder and provides a framework of clearly defined sections and pages. The template was designed to standardise the structure of portfolios of assessment in FE, with sections and pages built in to guide assessors and students in the compilation of assessment documentation (see Appendix A for overview of ePortfolio structure). Necessary elements were built into the template to ensure all portfolios submitted using the system meet all QA obligations. Whilst standardised and streamlined in structure, the ePortfolio also provides great flexibility. OneNote allows for the embedding of multiple file types, supporting the playing of video and audio as well as digital inking for providing written feedback and grading. The ePortfolio Project involved the roll out of this template, which was designed and implemented in tandem with a supported professional development programme for educators.

## Research Question

My recent involvement in this practice-based innovation provides a unique opportunity to explore the current assessment landscape in FE. In particular, this research will investigate:

**What are assessors experiences of Quality Assured Assessment in Further Education and how does the use of ePortfolios of Assessment impact this process?**

## Conclusion

This literature review has explored the past and present literature and highlighted the gaps relating to these areas. It will support the planning and development of this research project, including the methodological choices and design. While this review has provided an understanding of the current context, these are areas undergoing rapid development and the recent influence of the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to be realised. The following chapter will outline the methodology of this research, as I strive to understand and learn from assessors' experiences of Quality Assured Assessment in Further Education and how technology can impact this process in a post pandemic world.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

The research methodology for this study has been designed following the identification of an issue and with the aim of investigating a practical solution. In this chapter I will begin by discussing the background to how the research methodology for this study has been shaped as well as the prominent research paradigm from which the research design has developed. Then I will discuss the two distinct phases of the research in turn, including details on the specific methods implemented, the participant sampling, and the data collection and analysis techniques employed for each phase. I aim to provide supporting rationale for the chosen methodological approach, while also acknowledging any shortcomings identified or issues that arose during the process. I will provide context regarding my positionality in relation to the methodological approach and the ways in which quality and rigour were protected and promoted. will be addressed, along with any relevant ethical considerations that were required.

### Research Paradigms in Social Research

In social and indeed educational research, the term paradigm is used to describe a researcher's 'worldview' (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). It is the lens through which a researcher approaches the methodological features of their research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017), and is based upon its own set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. Ontology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality, and proponents from different ends of the ontological spectrum argue for the existence of a single versus multiple realities (Crotty, 2020). Epistemology, on the other hand is the philosophical study of the nature of knowledge; the word coming from the Greek words *epistēmē* ("knowledge") and *logos* ("reason"). The way in which each of us view the nature of reality, influences our perception of knowledge and in turn, this strongly influences the methodological approaches we use to understand the world (Carter & Little, 2016).

One of the major debates in social sciences is whether the social world can be studied according to the same principles as the natural sciences. The epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences is positivism, which follows the principle of objectivism and aims to generate and test hypotheses (Outhwaite, 2015). The epistemology that contrasts with positivism is that of interpretivism and they can be imagined as sitting at the two opposite ends of an epistemological continuum (Betzner, 2008). From the perspective of interpretivism reality is “constructed out of the interaction between humans and their world” (Scotland, 2012 p. 12). Regarding educational research, the positivist paradigm seeks to generalise, and the interpretive paradigm seeks to understand (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). However, there are several other prominent paradigms such as the critical paradigm (Asghar, 2013), which takes account of power relations in society and the pragmatic paradigm, which is the lens through which the methodology in this research project permeates. The pragmatic positioning of this research is discussed in detail below.

### The Pragmatic Paradigm

Pragmatism as a research paradigm postulates that a researcher should use the philosophical or methodological approaches that best addresses the research problem (Tashakkori et al., 1998). It was developed in an effort to challenge the two diametrically opposed positions of the positivists and the interpretivists, and to end what were referred to as the ‘Paradigm Wars’ (Gage, 2016). The origins of pragmatism as a research paradigm is based on the philosophical pragmatic movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Founding fathers of pragmatism include the philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and the educationalist John Dewey (R. B. Johnson et al., 2017). One form of pragmatism is based on the work of Dewey and his contribution to the field, focussing on the concept of inquiry (Morgan, 2017). Dewey defined inquiry as the controlled transformation of a problematic situation into one that is sufficiently integrated with knowledge or coherent action (Ormerod, 2006). For pragmatists, knowledge is always based on experience rather than as reality (Kaushik et al., 2019). In the context of educational research,

which is often applied or practical in nature, pragmatism is an attractive position from which issues can be explored. Indeed, the major characteristics of this paradigm and its philosophical underpinnings of gaining knowledge through an understanding of human experience and using this knowledge and additional action to improve a practical situation are fully aligned with the aims of this research project.

### *The Pragmatic Paradigm and Educational Research*

Pragmatism is viewed as a philosophy that supports research that is committed to practice. The increasing demand for a pragmatic perspective in educational research is based on the idea that as a paradigm it is associated with action (Biesta, 2003). Rather than simply observing processes, pragmatic research often extends out to intervene in practice, to provide innovative solutions and improvements (Biesta, 2003). As an important aspect of this research is to explore the impact of a technological intervention in practice, pragmatism is a fitting paradigmatic position from which the research design for this project can develop. In addition, contemporary pragmatists are invested in developing ideas, rather than attempting to attain absolutes (Kalolo, 2015). This is therefore highly suited to the exploration of dynamic educational processes, such as those being investigated in this dissertation. Finally, pragmatist researchers can have a mixture of philosophical positions (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009), facilitating greater focus on the methodological approaches that best address the research question.

### *Mixed Methods*

The 'pragmatic rule' enables truth to be attained with an emphasis on 'what works best' (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020; Wahyuni, 2012), making pragmatism a supportive philosophical partner for mixed methods research (R. B. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2016). Mixed methods research is the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches or methods in a single study. A mixed methods design was applied in this study for multiple reasons. Firstly, the mixing of methods allows a researcher to gain both breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding as they strive to answer their research question from multiple positions (Johnson, 2007). Neither quantitative or qualitative

methods alone were sufficient to identify the prevailing practices of educators and to fully understand their experiences of these practices. In addition, mixing methods allows for triangulation; the analysis of results using different methods of data collection (O’Cathain et al., 2010), further enhancing the validity of the research.

### Mixed Method Design

The mixed methods strategy employed in this research was a sequential explanatory mixed methods design. Data was collected and analysed across two distinct phases, in a consecutive manner, with the first informing the second (Ivankova, 2006). This was to allow for an analysis of currently unknown experiences and practices, before embarking on a deeper exploration of key findings. The initial phase consisted of an online survey of FE assessors. This method was chosen because it provided a greater reach to potential participants than other methods. It was also the most logistically feasible at a time when educators in the sector were working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Finally, the online format allowed for fully anonymised responses, and in turn, a better chance that respondents felt free to answer completely honestly (Ward et al., 2014).

The majority of the survey questions were closed, with multiple choice answers. However, some open questions were also included, for participants to provide detail or recount feelings and experience. This concurrent, intra-method mixing facilitated the collection of multidimensional results. It ensured that while some results were highly quantifiable, the open-ended questions also provided an opportunity to further interpret some of these findings and allowed participants to provide insights and details about their experiences. The data collected in phase one was analysed and the results used to inform the design of phase two.

Phase two consisted of a focus group, following a semi structured qualitative approach. The topics explored were based on the findings from phase one as well as focusing on the participants experience of the ePortfolio project. A focus group was deemed to be the most suitable approach

because the group setting allowed for diversity of expression and the enrichment of individual contributions via the inputs of others (Dahlin Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006).

One drawback of the chosen approach is the resource implications (Halcomb, 2019). As this is a project involving a sequential design, time must be carefully balanced to collect and analyse the phase one data, for it to appropriately inform phase two. However, with careful design and consideration of the requirements, the integration of methods will provide the best opportunities to address the research question in this underrepresented research area. An overview of the sequential explanatory mixed methods design is below in Figure 3.1.

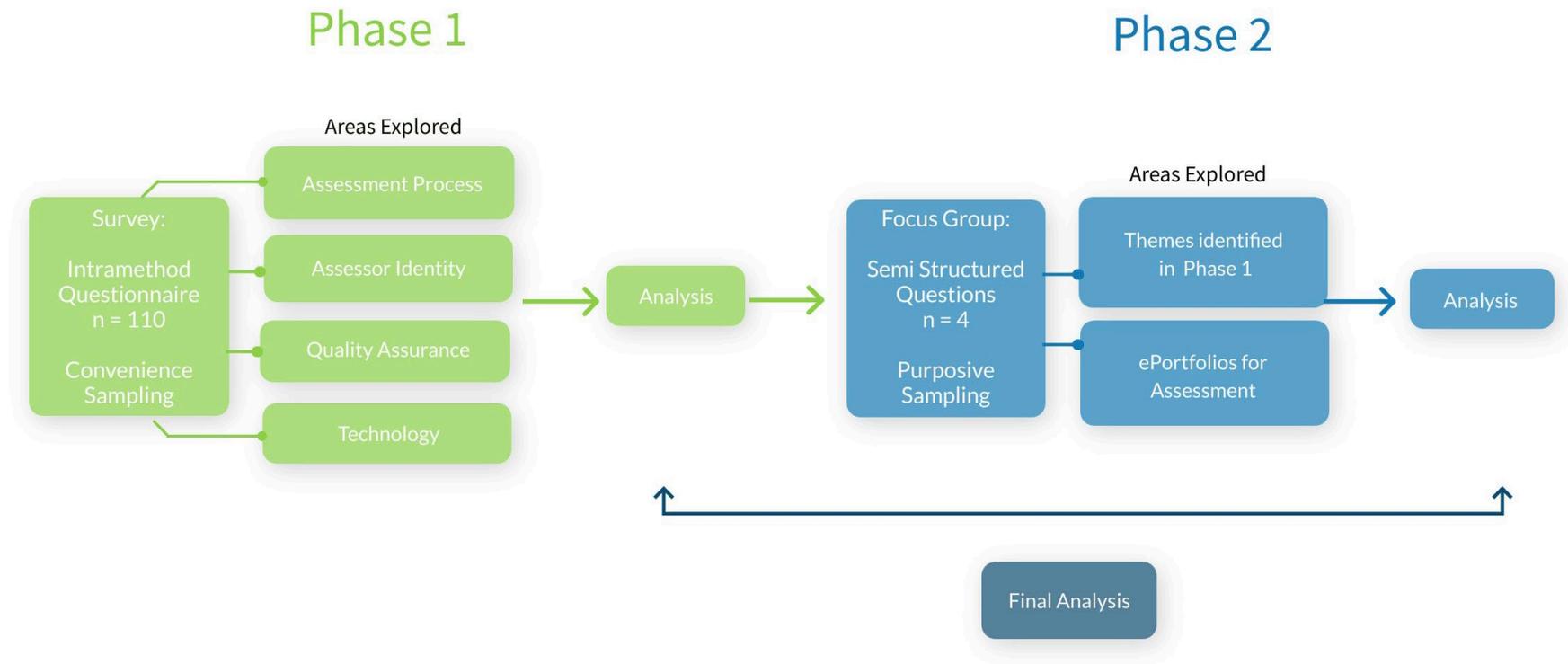


Figure 3.1 An overview of the sequential explanatory mixed methods design, featuring an intra-method survey followed by a qualitative semi structured focus group

## Research Phase 1: Survey

### Phase 1: Instrument Design

The questionnaire (see Appendix B) was designed to include intra-method mixing, which will allow for the collection of multidimensional results (B. Johnson & Turner, 2010). It will ensure that while some results will be highly quantifiable, open questions will also provide an opportunity to interpret some of these findings, allowing participants to provide insights and details about their experiences. The questionnaire was designed to be distributed and completed by participants online via Microsoft Forms, which accepted responses anonymously. This application was chosen due to its familiarity to staff in the Further Education sector. Key publications that influenced the design of the questions included the QQI guidelines on Quality Assuring Assessment, the Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy (2017 – 2019) and the research article 'Rhetoric and reality: The Irish experience of Quality Assurance' Fitzsimons, C. (2017). The survey was piloted with a colleague and discussed at length with professionals working in Quality Assurance and with experience of Assessment, Internal Verification and External Authentication.

One difficulty that was encountered during instrument design was the inconsistent assessment processes between “further education” and “training” within providers. This anomaly, that exists due to legacy issues in the sector, means that it is not uncommon to find the same module being offered by the same provider (ETB or other) albeit assessed via different processes. In training services, assessments are centrally devised, provided to assessors in a pack called the Assessment Instrument Specifications (AIS). This is in sharp contrast with Further Education services in which assessors are responsible for generating locally devised assessments. To ensure that this survey accurately captured the data relating to assessment in the Further Education arm of the sector, branching questions were provided to participants ensuring that the survey findings could be accurately interpreted.

## Phase 1: Participation and Ethical Considerations

Inclusion criteria sought FE educators who had taken on the role of assessor in the previous five years. The sampling approach was one of convenience, where respondents self-selected in response to a circulated invitation. The research instrument was shared via the researcher and the FE Professional Development Coordinator of the host institution. It was also circulated via other professional network groups such as the FET Quality Assurance network and the FE teachers/tutors Ireland Facebook page. Written details about the research, its purpose and potential impact were included with the link to the questionnaire. A video describing the research and its potential value to the sector was also included in the circulated promotional material. Voluntary and informed consent was obtained digitally from all participants. Ethical risk associated with this study is relatively low as all participants are adults answering questions specifically relating to their professional practice. In addition, all data was collected anonymously, so no identifiable data was gathered at the point of collection.

## Phase 1: Data Collection and Analysis

The survey remained open for three weeks and a total of 110 participants submitted responses. Participant details were analysed first to understand the characteristics of the sample and details are illustrated in Figure 3.2. The sample of 110 participants represented assessors of a wide range of FE programmes and NFQ levels. It also contained participants across a relatively even distribution of service lengths. In 2015, the largest survey of this population ( $n = 2,937$ ) was carried out as part of the FET Professional Development Strategy (2017-2019). Where possible, the sample from that survey was compared to this sample of 110 participants. A comparison of the ratio of males to females and the proportion with teacher specific qualifications are shown in Figure 3.3.

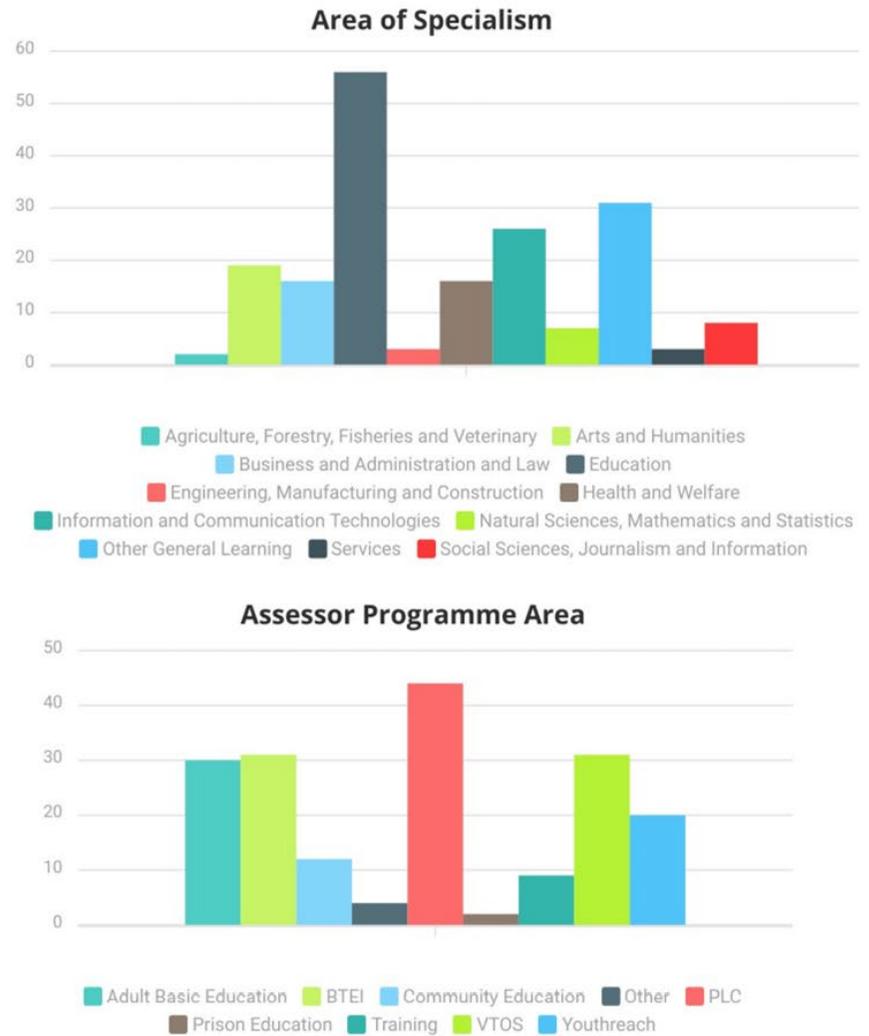
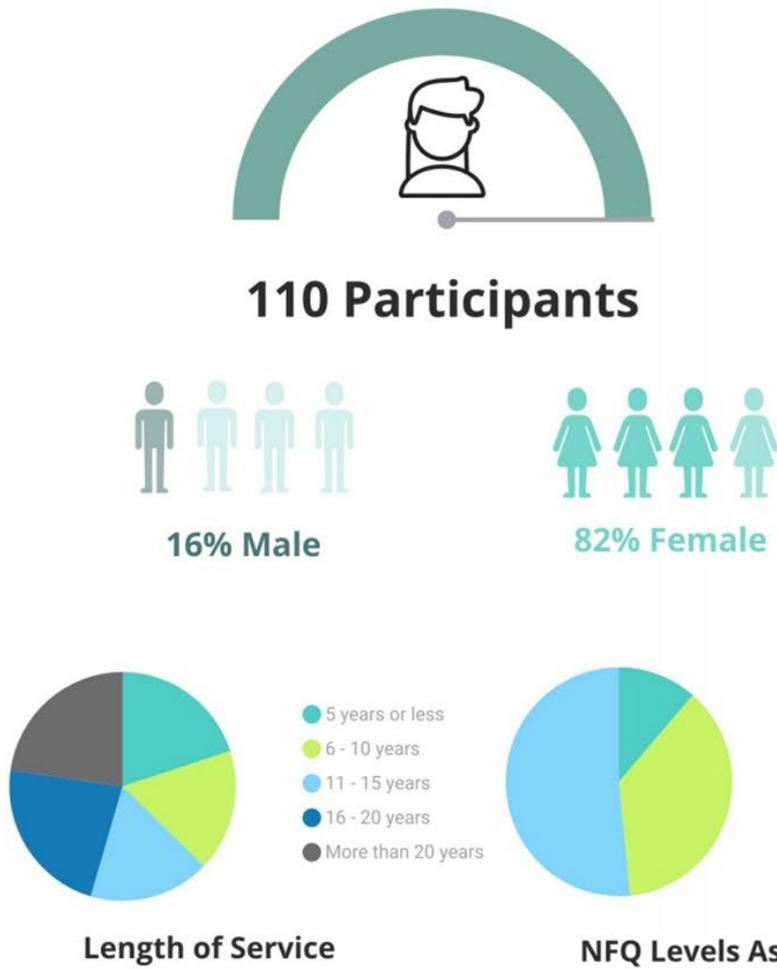


Figure 3.2 An overview of survey sample characteristics, including information on gender, length of service, NFQ levels assessed, areas of vocational or academic specialism and the programmes assessed

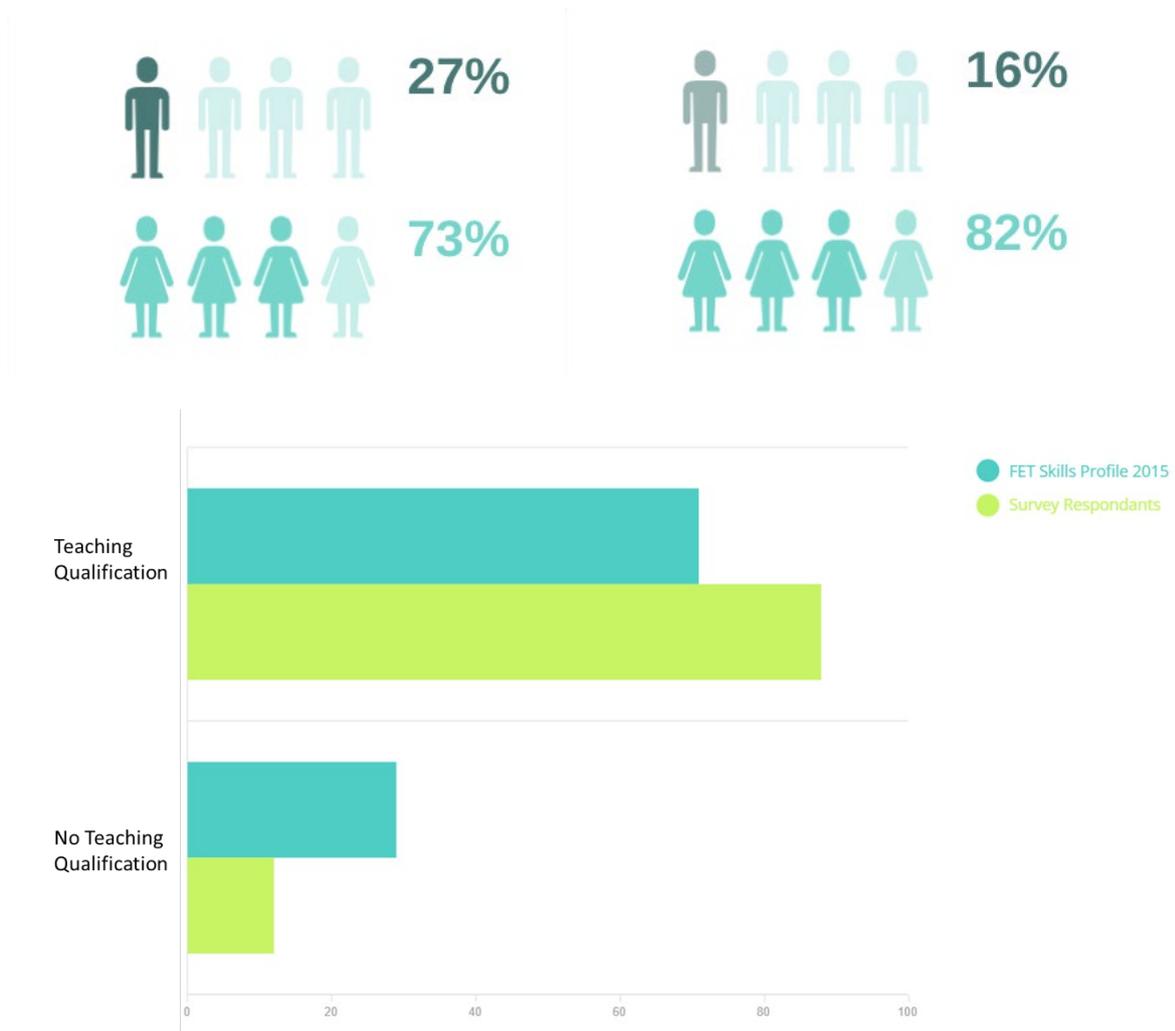


Figure 3.3 A comparison of survey sample (n =110) characteristics and the survey sample (n = 2,937 from the FET Skills Profile survey of 2015).

Analysis continued with quantitative results being graphed and analysed using descriptive statistics. A Fisher’s exact test (with an alpha level of .05) was also used to identify any significant differences between participants based on their roles in the assessment processes, their length of service and their qualification status. Fisher’s exact test is a non-parametric test that is used for contingency tables, that is more accurate than Chi Squared tests when count frequencies are low in certain categories (SAGE Research Methods Datasets Part & 2, 2019). The data generated from the open-ended survey questions were analysed using Braun & Clarkes reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was selected for several reasons. Firstly, as a method, it is not coupled with any particular epistemological perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a well-

documented and straight forward analysis method, with a clear and usable 6 step framework provided (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was analysed manually with initial codes generated by going through each open-ended question individually. A number of themes and subthemes that best represented the data were then clarified.

## Research Phase 2: Focus Group

Phase two of this project was designed to address two main aims. Firstly, to further explore educators' experiences of quality assured assessment, informed by the findings from phase one. Secondly, to examine ways in which a new ePortfolio system may support these processes into the future. While semi structured interviews had initially been considered to address these aims, a focus group, made up of individuals who are working together on this project emerged as the clear choice of research instrument. This allowed for interactions between participants as they made sense of their experiences, in turn leading to the construction of new knowledge (Dahlin Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006).

## Phase 2: Instrument Design

A focus group offered a unique opportunity to study the way in which participants collectively made sense of the processes that govern assessment and the related findings from phase one. It would also provide a valuable collective review of the ePortfolio model as perceived by the intended users, with thick descriptions and discussions (Caillaud & Flick, 2017). The focus group was designed to be carried out online, using the Microsoft Teams platform and to last a duration of 1.5 hours. I acted as facilitator, following a semi structured schedule of questions. Throughout the duration, I provided information on phase one, asked questions and managed the discussion, but did not express any personal opinions.

## Phase 2: Participation and Ethical Considerations

Purposive sampling was used and a small sample of four participants attended the focus group discussion. The inclusion criteria for this phase were that participants had direct, first-hand

experience of the new ePortfolio for assessment and the associated processes, having participated in the ePortfolio project roll out in the host organisation. Participants also had a broad range of professional backgrounds and teaching experience, as listed in Table 3.1, allowing them to bring multiple perspectives to the table.

*Table 3.1 Focus group participant details*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>NFQ Level Assessed</b>
<b>01</b>	<b>Mathematics and Science</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>02</b>	<b>Art &amp; Design</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>03</b>	<b>Community, Healthcare &amp; Nursing</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>04</b>	<b>Business &amp; IT</b>	<b>4 &amp; 5</b>

A consent form was shared electronically with all participants and a brief outline of the topics to be explored in the focus group was provided (see Appendix C). Participants were also assured of anonymity and that the full transcripts of their contributions would not be published in the dissertation or in any associated publications. Following the focus group, the key themes identified were shared with the participants for member checking. Ethical risk associated with this study is relatively low as all participants are adult professionals discussing experiences relating to their practice. However, consideration was given to the fact that the participants and researcher work in the same organisation and have participated in the same ePortfolio community of practice. To ensure that individuals felt no perceived pressure to participate, invitations were sent via the organisations FE Professional Development Coordinator, rather than directly from the researcher.

## Phase 2: Data Collection and Analysis

The focus group was recorded and the audio file was automatically transcribed using the audio to text transcription software Otter.ai. The transcript was manually checked, edited, and corrected where necessary. It was then analysed using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following the same framework as used for the qualitative survey data. The data was analysed manually. Once a list of codes was generated, relevant participant quotes were compiled in an organised list. Finally, by analysing the codes and corresponding participant quotes, a number of themes were identified, which were felt to best represent the data and answer the research question.

## Integrated Analysis of Separate Phases and Methods

Integration of data or its analysis is a fundamental component of mixed methods research, clearly distinguishing it from other approaches. One approach to integration of data at the analysis stage is to "follow a thread" (O'Cathain, 2010). This approach best describes the integrative analysis in this project. After phase one and two were analysed independently, themes (or threads) from one phase were tracked and explored across the other. Common threads were also followed between the quantitative and qualitative data from the intra-method survey. This meant, for example, that the exploration of themes could lead to the development of hypotheses, that could be quantitatively tested. In this regard, the proper integration of these methods produced findings that were richer and more colourful than the independent sum of their parts.

## Methodological Impact on Research Quality

### Quality in Mixed Methods Research

There is ongoing debate in the social sciences regarding how best to outline the approaches taken to maximise quality in studies using mixed methods (O'Cathain, 2010). As different methods are often linked to different paradigms, a common approach is to have separate quality criteria for the quantitative and qualitative components of studies that are also paradigm specific (Bryman,

1988). However, in line with the pragmatic underpinnings of this study, others argue that the research design itself determines the most appropriate ways to measure research quality (O’Cathain et al., 2017). In this study, quality has been promoted for each of the individual methods while also ensuring high quality integration of methods and analyses.

### Validity, Reliability and Rigour

Validity and reliability are two key considerations in all research. The survey in phase one of this project was carefully designed with these principles in mind. There are different types of validity measures, dependent on the instrument and measurements being made (Taherdoost, 2018). For the survey, content validity was an important consideration. The language and terminology used in survey questions were carefully refined with the input of colleagues familiar with the areas of assessment and quality assurance. The sample of survey participants was also a key factor in ensuring high levels of external validity. Widespread promotion of the survey was important to allow for the inclusion of a wide cohort of respondents that are representative of the study population. The concept of reliability is related to the consistency of measurements (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Included in the survey were several questions that had been included in a previously published study in the area of quality assurance in Ireland (Fitzsimons, 2017). Their inclusion was a way of comparing the reliability of data in this research instrument with the previous survey data. While careful consideration of both validity and reliability are accepted requirements of quality control in quantitative studies (Heale & Twycross, 2015), the use of both terms is often excluded from qualitative research. The renowned work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) first led to the replacement of these terms and their overwhelming disappearance from naturalistic studies. Instead, the concept of trustworthiness, which focuses on a qualitative studies credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability is a commonly used measure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility is protected with the use of triangulation and member checking. Both within and across method triangulation is used in the analysis of the data from phase one and two. In terms of transferability, the results from this study are highly transferable across the Further Education sector nationally.

However, due to the specific assessment processes that apply to this sector only, the experiences of educators are highly contextualised. In addition, the nature of the portfolio of assessment implemented in the ePortfolio project and explored in the focus group is unique and unlike assessment portfolios in other educational contexts.

### Challenges and Limitations

Transparency regarding the limitations of a study is a crucial part of quality research. The main methodological challenges encountered in this study are outlined below:

#### *Survey sampling*

Self-selection bias is a limitation of online survey research. Respondents are potentially more likely to have strong views on the issues being explored, therefore having the potential to impact the external validity. In addition, the survey sample of 110 educators are more likely to be digital residents (White & Cornu, 2011), engaging in the online world with a greater degree of social visibility, than other members of the population. The survey was shared exclusively online, including via professional social channels. As a result, it is possible that the survey sample may over represent members of the population that are more immersed in the world of technology and who may be more positive about its impact and future potential. However, the survey was completed at a time when all educators were working remotely, meaning that this online survey likely had much higher rates of population coverage than under normal circumstances. The sample also appears to represent a group of educators in which a higher proportion hold a teaching qualification than the most recent data available for the population. This raises the possibility that this may have introduced sample bias. However, the data being used to make this comparison is from a survey in 2015. There are increasing levels of professionalisation in the sector, with Further Education teaching courses, being accredited by the Teaching Council since 2013. For registration with the Teaching Council as a Further Education teacher, this qualification is now a prerequisite. Therefore, the increased levels of qualification in this survey may also represent a general trend that has occurred in response to these measures.

### *Time and resource constraints*

The consecutive design and the mixing of methods both within and between phases of this project contributed to limitations on time and resources. Careful management and additional investment of time, particularly at the analysis stage, was required. In addition, to maximise the potential of the research regarding the ePortfolio project pilot, it was necessary to wait until focus group participants were actively preparing for the assessment period and had as much experience with the ePortfolio as possible. This required that the focus group was held late in the course of the research project, creating an additional constraint on time.

### *Researcher Positionality*

When I embarked on this research, I was confronted with the question of how my own personal experiences of learning as well as my professional experiences as an educator and scientist may shape this project? Reflexivity is a process that has been described as “a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researchers’ positionality” (Berger, 2013). It is a key feature of rigour in qualitative research (Cypress, 2017), that allows for interrogation of the choices we make regarding the research question and our own situatedness in research. This is crucially important in the context of a practice-based research project such as this, where my interwoven positions of educator, assessor, designer, researcher and student had to be carefully considered.

While my professional position enables me to identify areas of assessment practice and the role of the assessor in Further Education that are underrepresented in the academic literature and warrant further examination, it is important to acknowledge the subjectivity that comes with this position and to ensure that my own experiences and biases did not negatively influence the research design. Subjectivity in research can be considered unfavourably, and at times is incorrectly equated with bias. particularly as part of traditional scientific discourse. However, subjectivity in a study can be both a strength and a weakness, especially if a research aim is to understand people and how they externalise their experiences. My involvement, familiarity and commitment to this area of research

as a result of my professional interests meant I had a good depth of understanding and the ability to interpret the experiences of others.

As I had been involved in the conceptualisation and co-design of the assessment ePortfolio that participants are being asked to review in the second phase of this project, it is critical to acknowledge and consider my own proximity to the research in this specific regard. An area that could have a negative impact, if not appropriately mitigated against, is the freedom felt by research participants to share their own true experiences, regardless of the opinions or views of the researcher, who they may know as a colleague. This was addressed in several ways. Firstly, the complete anonymity of the survey provided a sense of safety to share information. Secondly, with regard to the small focus group, participants were selected from a group of educators who had been working together for several months as part of a learning community in a professional development context and had forged relationships of trust and comfort in which to share and learn from each others professional experiences. In order to ensure that participants were clear about the aim of the focus group and the areas and boundaries for discussion, they were provided with written and verbal details several days in advance and prior to providing consent to participate. It was explicitly stated and reiterated during the focus group that all feedback including critical analysis of the ePortfolio project was important and that overarching purpose of the discussion was to identify areas for improvement and ways to achieve this.

Finally, before finding my vocation in education five years ago, my background was in research, in the field of the Biological Sciences. During this time, positivism was the dominant and largely unquestioned epistemological force behind all of my experimental designs. My understanding and acceptance of what we know and how we seek out new knowledge of social processes and human experience was something that I had to evaluate for the first time in designing this research project and refining the methodology. After years of being immersed in a world where empiricism and objectivity were held in a position of privilege, I needed to examine, and indeed reassess some of my own axiological and epistemological assumptions. It is important to remember

that the researcher's position may be fluid rather than static (Berger, 2013), meaning that reflexivity must be a continuous process, and positionality should be considered during all phases of research. To account for this, I have documented the process, my decisions and my reflections throughout.

## Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the background and rationale supporting the methodological approach that underpins this research project. The research design from its paradigmatic foundations through to the methods and analysis techniques have been outlined and interrogated. The mixed methods strategy chosen has been selected because it was identified as the most effective approach to address the studies aims and answers the research questions. Ensuring the rigour of the research has been central to each methodological decision, from the sampling strategies to the integrated analyses of mixed method results. The impact of researcher reflexivity and the limitations of the study have been included in this context to ensure transparency and increased study validity. The major results and findings are presented and discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

### Introduction

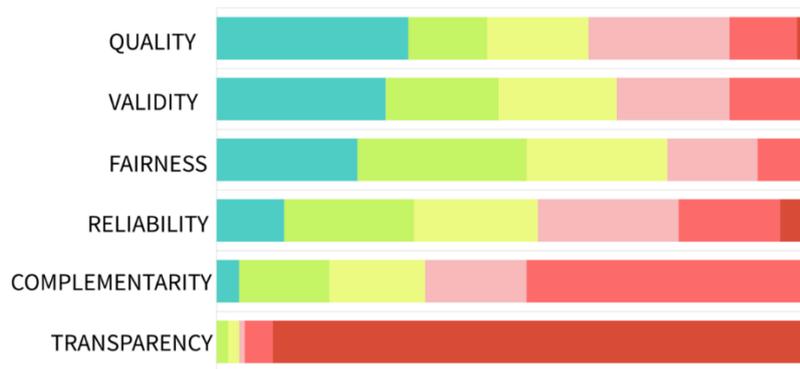
This chapter will outline the findings from both phases of this research project. Findings from the survey will be presented and discussed first followed by the findings from the subsequent focus group. Survey results include both quantitative and qualitative data relating to assessors' experiences of quality assured assessment, and these are organised thematically. This is followed by the results and discussion relating to the small focus group, which explored the phase one survey themes in greater detail. It also centred on the participants experiences of ePortfolios for assessment this year and how this experience may impact on the other themes discussed.

### Phase 1: Survey

#### Educators' attitudes towards Assessment Principles and Quality

Participants responded to a variety of closed questions relating to their views on the principles of assessment upon which the sector's QA system is devised. When asked to consider the assessment principles that they value most, assessors ranked quality at the top of the list. This is a strong indication of the value placed on the principle of quality by FE educators and is in agreement with the conclusion reached by Fitzsimons, 2017, that "adult educators do care about quality". When asked to rank these same principles in the order of which they feature in the participants' professional context, these principles again came out at the top of the list, but with validity in first place followed by quality (Figure 4.1). Validity in assessment can be promoted in a variety of ways, one of which is the use of a variety of assessment techniques (Rust, 2004). By applying different techniques such as a theoretical written test in combination with a skills demonstration for example, the candidates can more authentically demonstrate their vocational competencies. As a sector that has a strong vocational ethos, valid assessments are crucial to prepare students for the world of work, and the strong application of this principle, as perceived by educators, is a positive attestation of the current assessment system.

### Assessment Principles Ranked in Order of Importance to Assessors



### Assessment Principles Ranked in Order of How Strongly they Apply

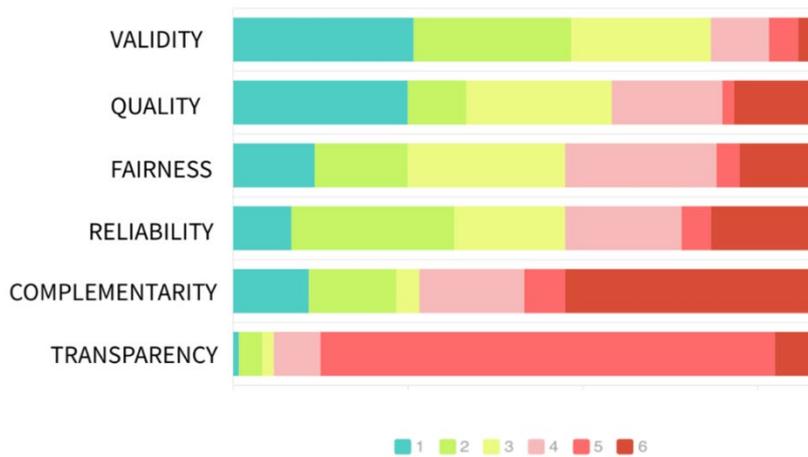
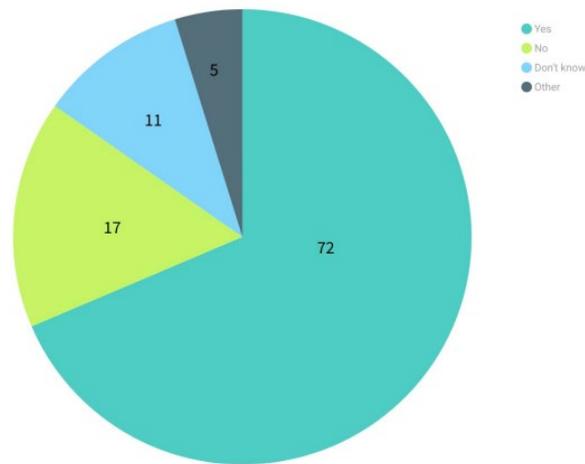


Figure 4.1 Principles of assessment ranked in order of their importance to respondents (top panel) and in order of how strongly they are applied in respondents assessment contexts (bottom panel), most important = 1 etc.

While educators rated quality as being very important to them, a clear distinction must be made between the application of the principle of quality versus the application of specific quality assurance processes. However, survey results also show that educators perceive quality assurance to be a positive force in relation to teaching and assessment. A majority of respondents stated that the application of QA had strengthened the principles of assessment (69%) and the quality of their own teaching practice (65%) (Figure 4.2). The latter of these two questions formed part of Fitzsimons’ previous survey of Irish Adult Educators, which also found that 65% of survey respondents agreed with this statement, providing convincing evidence of survey reliability. However, a substantial minority of educators answered no to these questions. This strongly suggests that this research is

required so we can better understand why educators do not believe quality assurance measures are having a positive impact on quality. These findings is also in general agreement with research relating to QA in Higher Education institutions. A recent survey of academics in an Irish Higher Education institute found that 72% agreed that the Quality Assurance system had helped to improve academic quality and 66% agreed that it helped to improve student experience (Twomey, 2020).

### Has the Application of Quality Assurance Processes Strengthened the Principles of Assessment?



### Has the Application of Assessment Quality Assurance Processes Enhanced the Quality of your Teaching Practice?

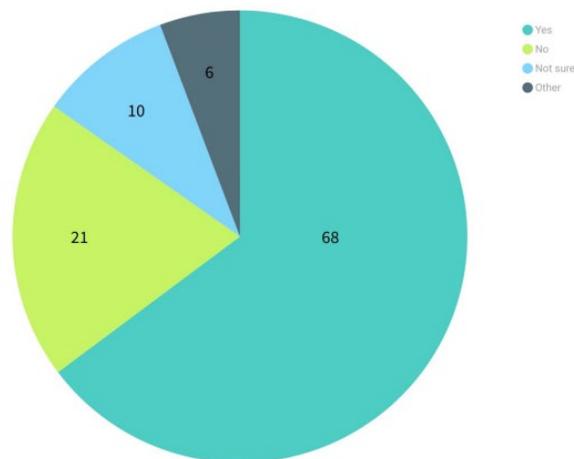


Figure 4.2 Educators' perceptions of the impact of QA on assessment principles (top panel) and the quality of their teaching practice (bottom panel)

## Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was carried out to identify themes in participant survey responses to three compulsory open-ended questions and two additional statements. The exact questions and statements responded to are as follows:

1. How have your experiences of Internal Verification had an impact on your role as assessor?
2. How have your experiences of External Authentication had an impact on your role as assessor?
3. If you have had a particularly positive or negative experience related to assessment, Internal Verification or External Authentication please share it here:
4. If you have any other thoughts about the quality assurance processes that govern assessment please share them here:
5. How do you think that technology could further support you in your role as an assessor (and in carrying out the QA responsibilities that this role brings?)

Three distinct themes, each broken down further into two more specific subthemes, were identified and they are outlined below in Figure 4.3.

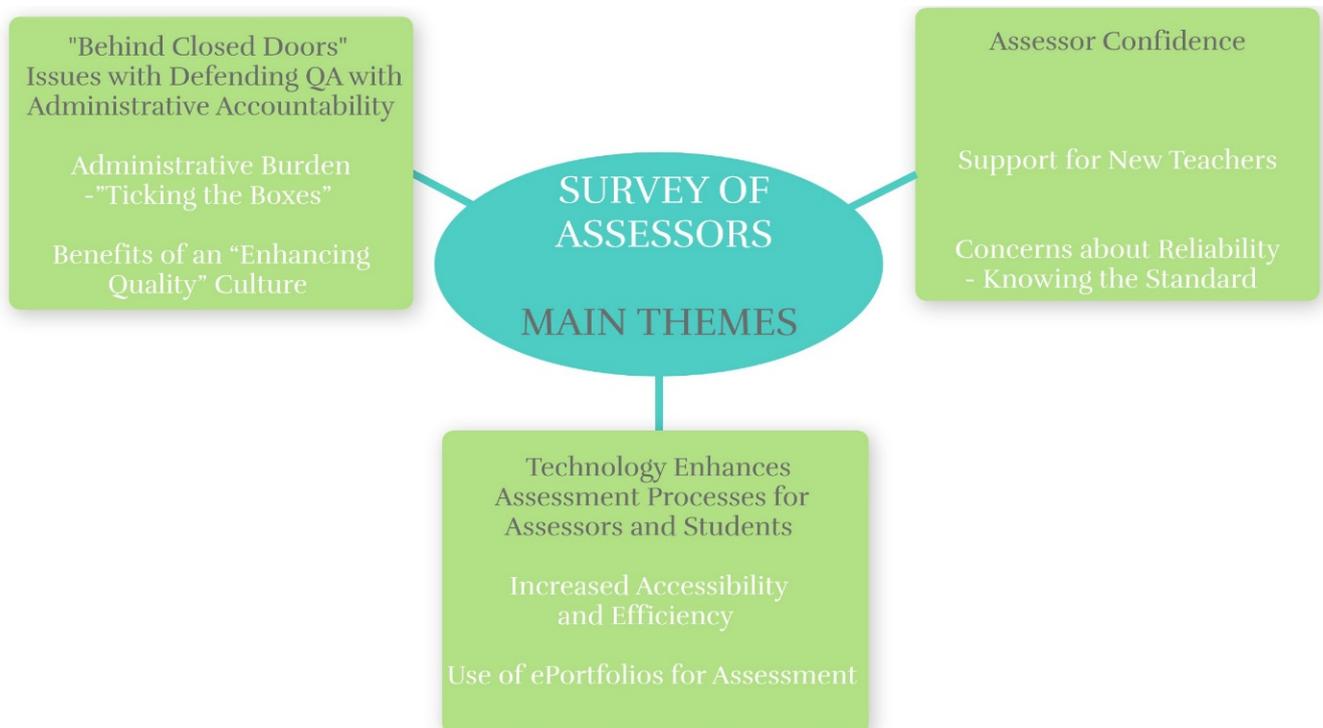


Figure 4.3 Themes and subthemes identified using thematic analysis of open-ended survey questions

Many of the survey participants shared stories and experiences of quality assured assessment processes in their own context. Many participants shared positive views of the process, indicating the value they place on the authentication system as a “positive and constructive process”. However, vastly different experiences were recounted, with some participants highlighting negative experiences and frustration with quality systems in their context. Many of the stark contrasts in assessor experience appeared to be linked to organisational and local QA practices. Various models of QA in education have been described in the literature. Firstly, Biggs’s described retrospective versus prospective approaches to QA (Biggs, 2001). More recently, Goff identified three approaches to QA through her phenomenographic research in the context of Canadian Universities (Goff, 2017). These were QA systems that focussed on: defending quality, demonstrating quality, and enhancing quality. This theme explores issues associated with a defensive QA culture and the observed benefits that came from a more progressive approach.

#### *Administrative burden*

When examining the responses, many comments were made regarding the administrative burden placed on them by the system. One participant commented: “Administration work related to QA has more than doubled over my career.” Of note, respondents were concerned by the amount of what was described as unnecessary or duplicated paperwork, with over ten participants commenting on paperwork in terms of either its volume or the excessive level of focus it receives in the authentication processes. Two observations were “Just more paperwork and templates to complete” and “Just a lot of unnecessary duplication of marking sheets which are required...too much paperwork to submit”.

Organisational QA forms, often devised and issued by providers to assessors to ensure systemic evidencing of certain quality assurance requirements were a specific source of discontent for some participants, with five individuals directly referencing them. Several educators questioned their fitness for purpose and effectiveness as well as their efficiency. The following participant

comments are suggestive of a perceived disconnect between the realities of implementation of quality assessment and the paperwork generated by those in administrative or managerial positions: “Forms and more forms generated by people who are not in classroom” and “All the new quality forms should be re-looked at to get rid of duplication or unnecessary information so that teachers can spend more of their time on teaching and learning with the students.” Furthermore, “There seems to be a disproportionate amount of extra and duplicated forms and administration in the FET sector in comparison to the JC/LC SEC”.

Four people included the phrase “tick box” when recounting the realities of their involvement in quality assuring assessment, while another response described the process as having a “lack of appreciation for deep learning. Focus seems to be mainly on yellow tape and paperwork.” Interestingly, this phrase “tickboxing” was also used in relation to QA in the previous survey of Irish educators by Fitzsimons (2017). In addition, an article examining the positive and negative aspects of QA in higher education explored the possibility that while QA systems are developed and implemented with best intentions, they can often cultivate “tick box” mentalities and promote minimum thresholds of quality (Stephenson, 2004), unintentionally leading to drops in academic motivation and quality itself. This sense of a disconnect between locally devised policies and on the ground practices reappears in the following submission.

One participant stated:

They need to be fully understood by management to ensure they are rolled out correctly.

They should not become a labour-intensive process that at times does not make logical sense, it’s purpose needs to be clear and not just additional paperwork for the sake of it.

This focus on ensuring that administrative tasks are relevant and purposeful is not surprising. The increased administrative burden because of QA requirements in recent times has been well documented (Dittrich, 2019; Gaber et al., 2011; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Formative assessment is considered to be one of the most time-consuming aspects of an educators’ role (Higgins et al., 2010), but its provision has been shown to be the most effective teaching strategy for increasing student

achievement (Hattie, 2008.). It is worth commenting that for this sample of assessors, 85% of the cohort regularly provide feedback to students and 89% of respondents also routinely give formative feedback on drafts, prior to students’ final assessment submissions (Figure 4.4). This survey finding demonstrates that educators spend considerable time carrying out administrative tasks that are widely known to benefit student learning and development in the assessment process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It appears that, when administrative tasks are deemed valuable for student learning and assessment, teachers and tutors in further education are more than willing to perform these activities.

## Do you provide feedback to learners?

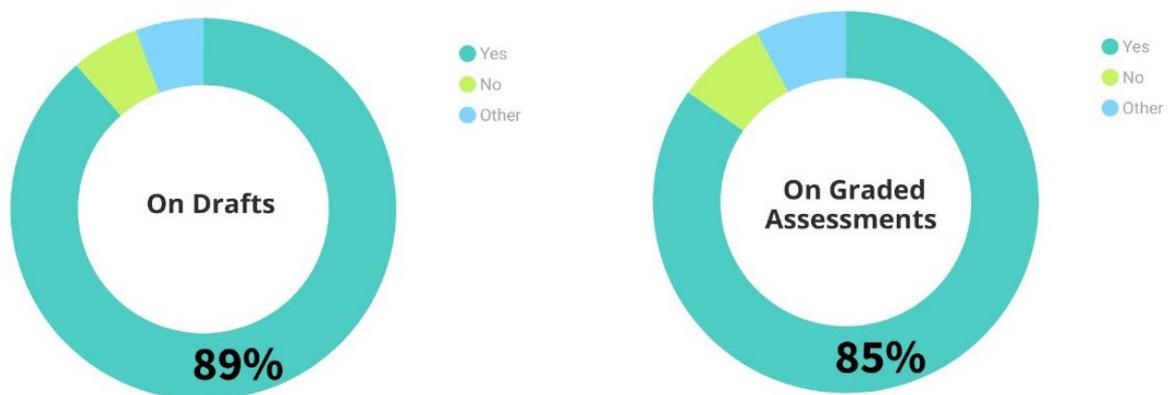


Figure 4.4 Percentages of survey respondents who provide feedback to learners on assessment drafts and on final submitted assessments

A 2018 study which aimed to examine the effectiveness of QA in Higher Education by quantifying the perceptions of quality managers found that the positive contributions of QA could be maximised if the strategy was firmly embedded, with clear support from senior managers and strong levels of collaboration and buy in from educators (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). On the other hand, the view of QA effectiveness was significantly negatively correlated with the use of QA to satisfy external demands that are required in order to achieve accreditations (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). This should be a consideration for everyone involved in designing QA systems that prevail in assessment. If the

system is viewed as a means to obtain certification or accreditation from external agencies, above other things, the process has the potential to decrease in effectiveness or at least, its perceived effectiveness by stakeholders.

The response below highlights this issue:

The IVing process in my organization is about ticking boxes, "getting it done"...it has no relation to teaching and learning. I see my role as assessor as linked with teaching, it is my moral imperative to support students with their own learning.

Similar experiences were recounted regarding external authentication with another contributor commenting "I can't say that experience of being EA'ed has had an impact other than encouraging good file management and presentation of finished work." Quality in education evolved based on motivations of scholarship; internal as well as external, not imposed structures (Harrison & Lockwood, 2001). Quality assurance mechanisms must be carefully designed and implemented to ensure that educators' motivations do not depreciate because of an overly dominant culture requiring them to respond to external monitoring and that seem to be devoid from their core role of educating and supporting students' educational development (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018).

Potential barriers to motivation can also appear when the external quality system does not reliably identify good and poor practice. If this does not occur, the exercise becomes futile, with assessors carrying out functions to satisfy external criteria, devoid of true meaning to them. One respondent felt that "it is never about content of module/depth of learning/standards. More about technical things being in place- signatures/marketing schemes". Another commented that they "find it inconsistent and often am left feeling demotivated." A lack of real meaning was also identified by some educators in terms of the requirements to document evidence that they had provided feedback to students. One frustrated response stated: "I think the evidence of feedback on each piece of work is ridiculous. Most feedback is given verbally and through formative assessment. Showing this as evidence is bureaucratic nonsense in my opinion." More bureaucracy was felt in another response:

Up to now we were told we had to have three written feedbacks for each student per module - this felt very artificial and very much like a paper exercise to satisfy the external examiner or prove that we were giving feedback. We were giving feedback anyway.

Documenting it on a specific form was time consuming, especially if the class was large.

As professional educators performing crucial roles as assessors, this could easily be interpreted as a degrading and demoralising request, which is difficult to rationalise. Also, in an example of a perfect contradiction, in some rare cases, assessors mentioned that they themselves did not receive the EA feedback from management that was specific to them. Comments included that “Feedback..has to be requested” and “I never get feedback as a tutor, we get general feedback”.

These lived experiences provide the starkest evidence of QA being used as an accountability exercise for the organisation only, with no opportunities for the educator to develop professionally or for assessment practices to be improved for students. The futility of these exercises go some way to explaining some of the resistance and frustrations directed at QA systems and structures as have been reported in both Higher and Further Education (Fitzsimons, 2017; Lucas, 2014). Thankfully and in contrast to this, a proportion of survey respondents communicated very positive experiences of the authentication process. A common thread was observed as to the reasons for educators finding the process beneficial and supportive. Unlike defensive QA, which is retrospective, grounded in administrative accountability and top down in nature (Goff, 2017), a contrasting culture of QA was experienced by some participants that contributed to positive outcomes. Advantages associated with a culture that aims to enhance quality rather than simply defend it are explored below.

#### Benefits of an “Enhancing Quality” Culture

A culture that aims to enhance quality is one that promotes the use of reflection to drive continued improvements (Goff, 2017). Some educators reported nurturing authentication experiences that fit the description of this type of approach. (Goff, 2017). This aligns with what is described as prospective QA and is underpinned by a supportive rather than judgemental culture (Biggs, 2001).

Positive comments included: “I have experienced only one IV process. It has helped me to appreciate the assessment process from start to finish and also to be less apprehensive about it as the IV process was collegial and constructive” and “...very positive. EA has been brilliant... working with me for revised assessments” This type of collegiality in a QA system has been identified by researchers as a particular conception of a quality model (Lomas & Ursin, 2009). This model also aligns with the prospective and enhancing culture models mentioned earlier, while also concentrating on creativity in the system. Interestingly, one survey participant detailed how they had made innovative changes to their practice having received encouraging feedback from an EA, again highlighting the benefits of this approach: “The positive feedback has encouraged me to be more innovative in how I assess certain topics, for example using a video log on Flipgrid as opposed to a written reflection log.”

However, the most striking finding regarding the benefits of collegial, constructive QA was found in the responses of a substantial number of educators who had experience of being authenticators themselves, as well as being assessors. Repeatedly, respondents expressed how valuable they had found these experiences as active participants in the authentication process, experiencing transparency and value that they were often not afforded in their role as an assessor.

One respondent noted:

Doing IV myself gave me more insight into general standards and approaches to measuring learning across multiple modules taught by different staff. The process of having my folders go through IV was less enlightening, as it is all done behind closed doors and feedback is only given if there is an error in the addition of numeric grades or a signature missing.

For some, experience of IV also led to greater opportunities for collaboration with colleagues. It was stated that “the experience of internal verification has opened the discussion up with other educators about their assessment practices, generating ideas and opportunities for collaboration between modules.” Other responses included: “I think seeing a variety of work as an IV is a positive process, it opens up conversations, allows the sharing of ideas and helps colleagues iron out minor

issues” and “internal verification can be a positive learning tool in picking up good practices and seeing how other colleagues interpret assessment etc”

It is important to state that internal verification is not designed to provide these opportunities. The specific role of an internal verifier is to systematically check that the provider’s assessment procedures have been applied consistently across assessment activities and to verify the accuracy of assessment results (QQI, 2018). The benefits being noted by respondents are in fact highly valuable side effects of fulfilling this role. The opportunities that IV can provide in promoting professional development and the maximising of a collegial culture is an important finding that should be given further consideration by providers and policy makers. One participant clearly saw the untapped potential in the process stating “I think that an opportunity to connect learning with assessment and the professional development of teachers/assessors is being missed”.

A forward looking, prospective quality framework has the potential to embed improved assessment practice and culture across an entire institution, instead of focusing on individual assessors (Biggs, 2001). In addition, international studies have shown that the way in which educators view, and value QA is dependent on the culture and climate in which they work. For example, in a Norwegian study of Higher Education institutes, staff responded with very mixed views on whether QA led to quality improvements. However, it was observed that the usefulness of QA was dependant on strong relationships between assessors, administrators, and managers (Aamodt et al., 2016), again highlighting the importance of collaborative and collegial processes. Finally, a recent Swedish study followed the implementation of what was called the process for quality assurance of assessment (PQAA). By involving teachers in the process of producing the documentation (curriculum mapping, assessment plans and assessment rubrics) the researchers stated that an important benefit was the development of a better understanding of each other’s roles, resulting in stronger collaboration between staff. The project was shown to lead to a more inclusive quality culture by involving teaching staff in the development of the process (Lucander & Christersson, 2020).

## Assessor Confidence

This theme deals with the confidence of FE educators in their role as assessors. As part of the survey, participants were asked to rate how confident they are in relation to their own understandings and contributions to the QA process as well as their confidence regarding the QA compliance at their place of work. The results are shown below in Figure 4.5, in which the proportions of responses that strongly agreed, partially agreed, partially disagreed and strongly disagreed with each statement are represented by colour in each bar.

### Assessor Confidence in the Implementation of Assessment QA Processes

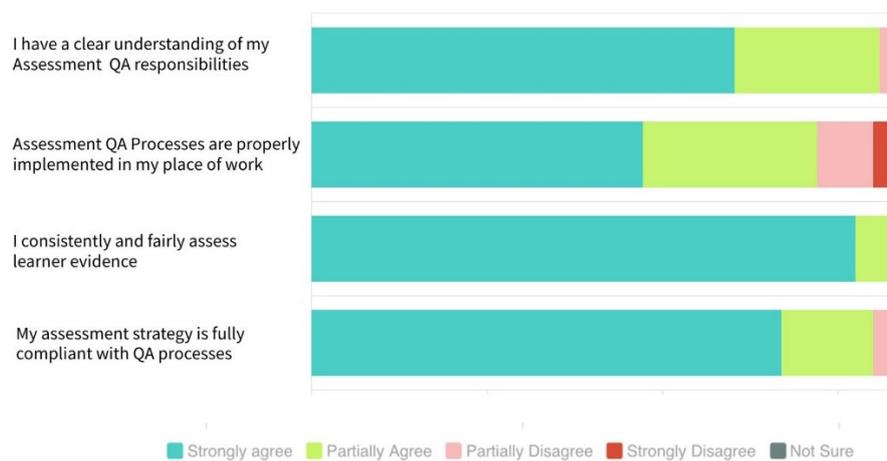
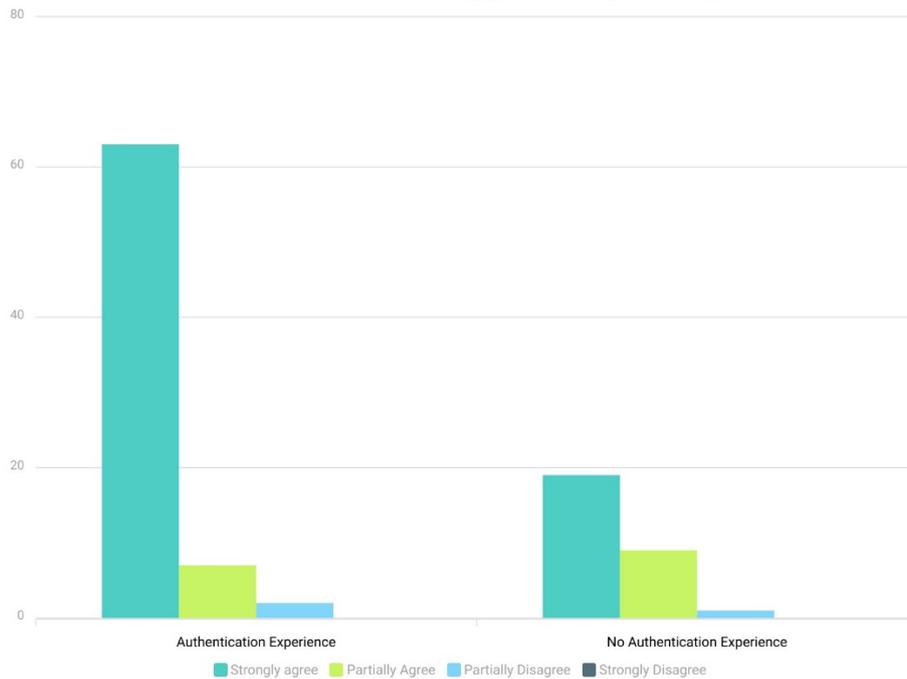


Figure 4.5 Confidence of respondents regarding the understanding and implementation of assessment processes by them and by their place of work

There was a very high level of agreement (strongly or partially agree) with all four statements. As has already been discussed, opportunities for assessors to take on the role of authenticator as part of an open and collegial quality process were identified as valuable experiences that enhance quality. In order to explore whether answers to these four statements were different based on whether the respondents had authentication experience, responses were grouped based on this categorical variable. Fishers exact tests were carried out and the frequencies were significantly different ( $p = .046$ ) for one of the 4 statements as shown below in Figure 4.6.

## Confidence that assessment strategy is fully compliant with QA process



*Figure 4.6 Confidence of respondents regarding their assessment strategy and its compliance with QA processes, grouped on the basis of having authentication experience or having experience as an assessor only*

The proportion of respondents who strongly agreed with the statement “My assessment strategy is fully compliant with QA processes” was higher for the authentication experienced group compared to those who had experience as assessor only (88% versus 66%). This provides strong evidence of the benefits of a quality assured approach to assessment that is accessible and transparent to assessors, and that opportunities to view assessment material submitted by others is a valuable learning experience for educators when it comes to assuring assessment quality.

This theme also deals with how feedback to assessors as part of the authentication process can affect confidence. Participants provided clear evidence of both positive and negative impacts of the processes on their confidence. When asked about their experience of the process, ten respondents specifically referred to how they experienced the receipt of feedback from authenticators as constructive. This included that “positive feedback from external authenticators has been affirming” and “... my experience has been that constructive feedback from an EA creates a

sense that we are part of a community of practice, is both challenging and encouraging, starts a conversation and makes us feel part of something bigger than ourselves...” On the other hand, negative experiences were often related to feedback that is inconsistent, with one respondent commenting “...sometimes excellent constructive criticism to improve on the following year but more often than not get contradicted information year on year”.

The theme of inconsistent feedback continued:

The EA process is crucial but the lack of consistency in recommendations from EA's is unnerving from an assessor and IV perspective. Difference EA's recommend varying process and procedures and this can be confusing and hinders the understanding of these assessors to their role and consistency of that role.

The vast majority of research on feedback has been focused on feedback for students, such as the works of Hattie and Timperley (2007). However, feedback is essential for professionals own academic development, including that of educators (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2017). Confusion and unsureness for assessors regarding what is required due to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory information is likely to impact their confidence.

#### [Support for New Staff](#)

A clear subtheme in the area of assessor confidence was that new staff in particular require additional support, as stated very clearly by multiple participants, with one stating “I think colleges need to give new teachers more support in relation to how it works in their particular institution. In my case it's left to each individual teacher there's no real guidance or clarity.” Many survey responses captured some difficulties and challenges that were faced by new and inexperienced staff, who often reached their first assessment period unprepared and lacking in confidence. One participant recalled that in their first assessment experience they were “...left virtually alone without help or support to complete assessment and I made so many mistakes and interpreted things incorrectly. Training and support would be vital.” Another concurred that their first experience

“...was very difficult” and they felt “that a lot of emphasis needs to be given to helping new teachers through assessment periods and peer mentoring would be an invaluable help in this area.”

In order to determine whether levels of assessor confidence was affected by respondents length of service, respondents were grouped based on whether they had up to or greater than ten years service. Fisher’s exact tests were carried out to compare the responses to the confidence questions shown in Figure 3.5. When participant responses to the four survey statements on confidence were grouped based on the length of service, the frequencies were significantly different ( $p = .031$ ) for one of the four statements as shown below in Figure 4.7.

### Confidence that assessment strategy is fully compliant with QA process

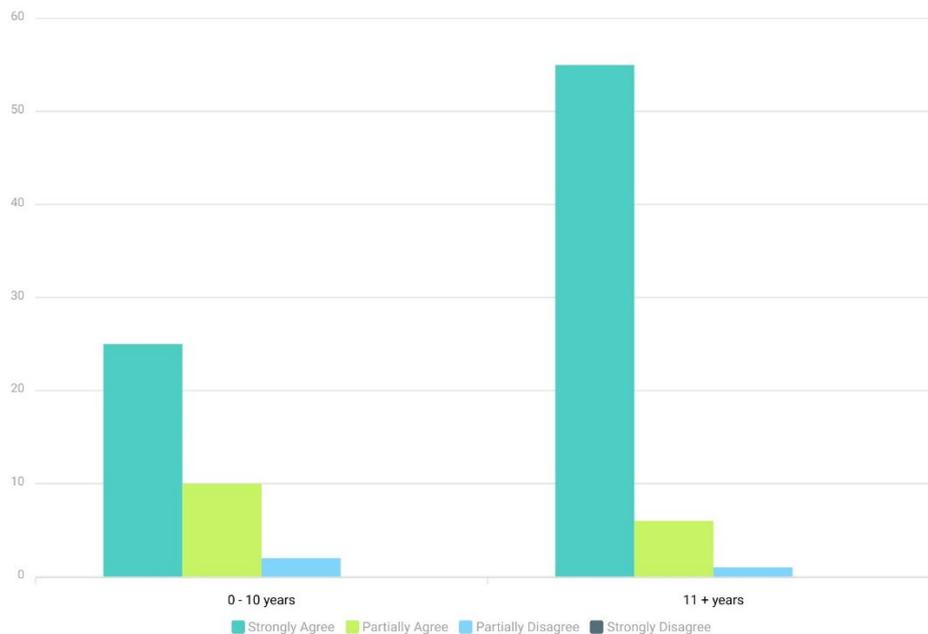


Figure 4.7 Confidence of respondents regarding their assessment strategy and its compliance with QA processes, grouped by participant length of service (less than 10 years versus greater than 10 years)

The proportion of respondents who strongly agreed with the statement “My assessment strategy is fully compliant with QA processes” was lower for the group of educators with between 0-10 years service compared to those who had greater than 10 years service (69% versus 89%) as shown in Figure 4.7. Another respondent also referred to the lack of quality assurance learning opportunities

for new teachers, and highlighted that it is not covered in Further Education teaching programmes, stating that:

It would be helpful if expectations with regard to internal verification and external authentication were outlined from the outset. For newly qualified teachers in particular - this process is not covered in detail in the FE teaching programmes and guidance on the process given was poor with everyone working from home this year.

In order to determine whether levels of assessor confidence differed for respondents holding teaching qualifications specific to the Further Education sector, Fisher's exact tests were carried out to compare the responses to the confidence questions in 3.5. Again, the frequencies were significantly different for one of the four statements as shown below in Figure 4.8.

### Confidence that assessment strategy is fully compliant with QA process

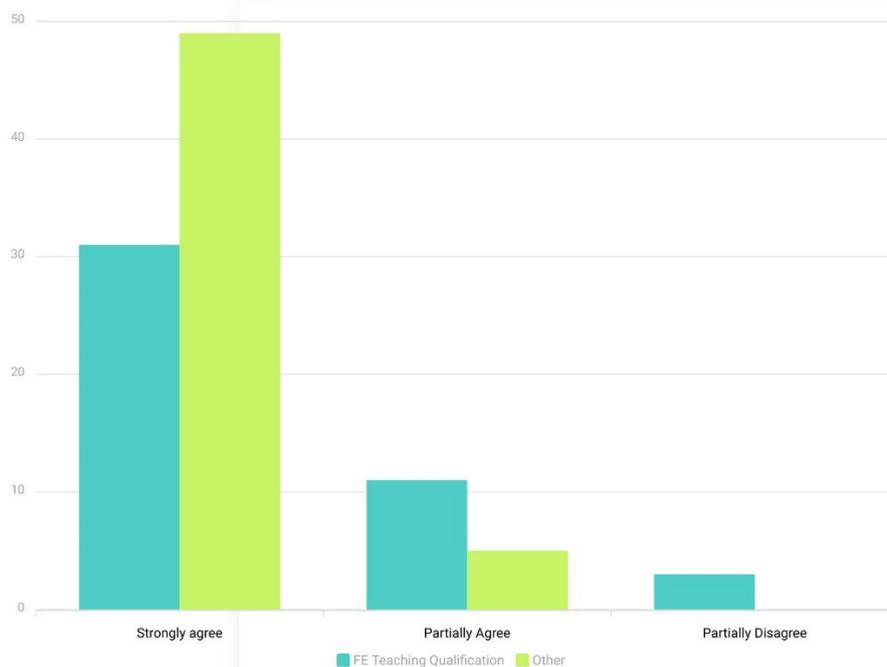


Figure 4.8 Confidence of respondents regarding their assessment strategy and its compliance with QA processes, grouped on the basis of holding a Teaching Qualification specific for the Further Education Sector

The frequency counts in response to the statement “I am confident that my assessment strategy is fully compliant with QA processes” were significantly different ( $p = .012$ ). The proportion of

respondents who strongly agreed with the statement was lower for the group of educators with a Teaching Qualification specific for the Further Education sector compared to others (69% versus 91%), as shown in Figure 4.8.

On the surface, it is difficult to rationalise how those with the most appropriate qualifications are less confident. However, on further examination, it is clear that these results are highly comparable to the results shown in Figure 4.6, when the respondents' length of service was explored as a variable. As the Further Education teacher training programmes were only introduced in 2013, it is plausible that the similarity in these results can be explained by a greater number of newer entrants to the sector being more likely to hold this qualification. When this possibility was explored, the survey data proved that this was indeed the case (41% of educators with  $\leq 10$  years service hold this qualification versus 34% of educators with  $>10$  years service).

These results provide strong evidence that supports the qualitative findings that indicate that an intervention is required to provide greater professional development opportunities for educators in assessment and quality assurance. This was also identified as an area of strategic priority in the sectors FET professional development strategy 2017-2019 (SOLAS, 2017). As part of this report, results from a wide ranging survey of educators identified that self-reporting on confidence levels relating to 19 different areas relating to their roles, "quality assurance policies and procedures" was the area with the second lowest level overall (SOLAS, 2017). Educators must feel confident in their own abilities. Judgements relating to quality assuring assessment are also related to the principle of reliability, about which a level of concern was made evident via several survey responses. These concerns, expressed by assessors, are discussed further below.

#### Concerns about Reliability- Knowing the Standard

This subtheme discusses assessors concerns about assessment reliability. Students receive certification for identical awards delivered by different staff, in different centres, under the remit of different providers throughout Ireland. Concerns about reliability and variation in standards as a result of this system, as articulated by one participant who stated that "locally based assessments

vary so so much that both their validity and reliability have to be questioned.” A previous survey of Irish educators in the sector also identified concerns that uniform standards are not being achieved (Fitzsimons, 2017). As a result of this existing evidence, participants in this survey were asked whether they had recent opportunity (in the last 5 years) to compare student submissions in response to different locally devised assessments for the same modules, by way of comparing standards (Figure 4.9). A small majority (57%) of respondents declared that they had done this. For the small number of respondents who provided comment, it appeared than these were unofficial, occurring for example, when co-delivering a module with another staff member or when an assessor inherited a module from another assessor.

Have you compared assessment evidence submitted to you for a particular module with evidence submitted to a different assessor?

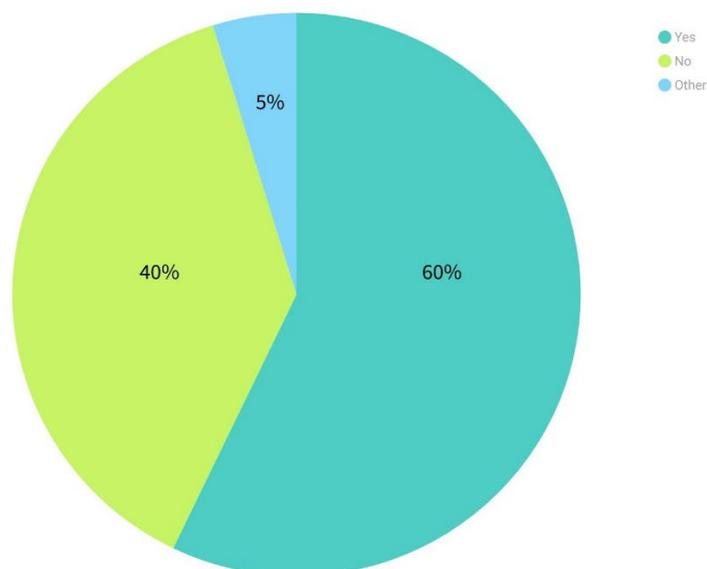


Figure 4.9 Percentage of participants who had compared students’ assessment evidence submitted to them with evidence submitted to an alternative assessor of the same module

The majority of survey responses that mentioned this as being an issue strongly indicated that assessors’ lack of confidence in assessment standards in the sector is because there is so little transparency in the system, with very few opportunities to benchmark their own assessment design

with that of others. One respondent stated that “there is a distinct lack of quality control and comparison of learner's work and grades within centres never mind between centres or nationally”

As previously discussed, fulfilling the role of an authenticator has proven very useful for assessors. One response revealed that “prior to working as an EA” they had “no opportunity in FE to see work from another teacher of the same subject.” One of the key benefits of a more open and inclusive quality system is that it provides a rare opportunity for assessors to benchmark. The role of moderation, a cornerstone of criterion-referenced assessment (Sadler, 2010) falls under the remit of external authenticators only, meaning that assessors themselves do not participate in any moderating activities. This was recognised by multiple participants: “I believe that more transparency and sharing of materials across ETBs would vastly improve the overall QA. Simply relying on EAs for this is not enough in my opinion”. Another observation was that “double marking of a percentage of assessments within the college may be beneficial to QA” Currently, the lack of opportunities for assessors in this regard is a shortcoming in the Further Education sector that needs to be addressed.

#### *Technology is Enhancing Assessment Processes for Assessors and Students*

In recent years, educators in Further Education have become more familiar with and competent in the use of relevant digital technologies for teaching and learning. The experience of being thrust into a technological world because of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its associated move to remote teaching has dramatically accelerated the adoption of technology. As one of the survey respondents noted, “due to Covid, the glass ceiling has been broken”. Another observed: “Technology in the classroom has really come to life due to COVID. The advancements have been extraordinary over the past year and have definitely benefitted both teacher and student.”

Specifically, in relation to assessment, respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the impact that technology was having for them and their students. Detailed responses to the question, “How do you think that technology could further support you in your role as an assessor (and in carrying out the QA responsibilities that this role brings)” allowed for the identification of two clear

subthemes, the increased accessibility and organisation of assessment that technology can provide and how the use of ePortfolios for assessment were supporting the process. Both of these specific sub themes are discussed below.

#### Increased Accessibility and Organisation

The use of technology in assessment activities was shown to have the potential to enhance staff efficiencies. Comments from the survey included that “it provides clear structures and ease of access overall” and that it could “...streamline the process but I would require additional training”. One of the most notable changes in the administrative management of assessment, appeared to be in the organisation and management of student submissions. Adaptations to practice as a result of COVID-19 restrictions led to a dramatic increase in the use of the Microsoft Teams platform (Figure 4.10). This is seen in conjunction with a stark reduction in paper-based submissions, which was being used as a submission method by 90% of participants prior to the pandemic.

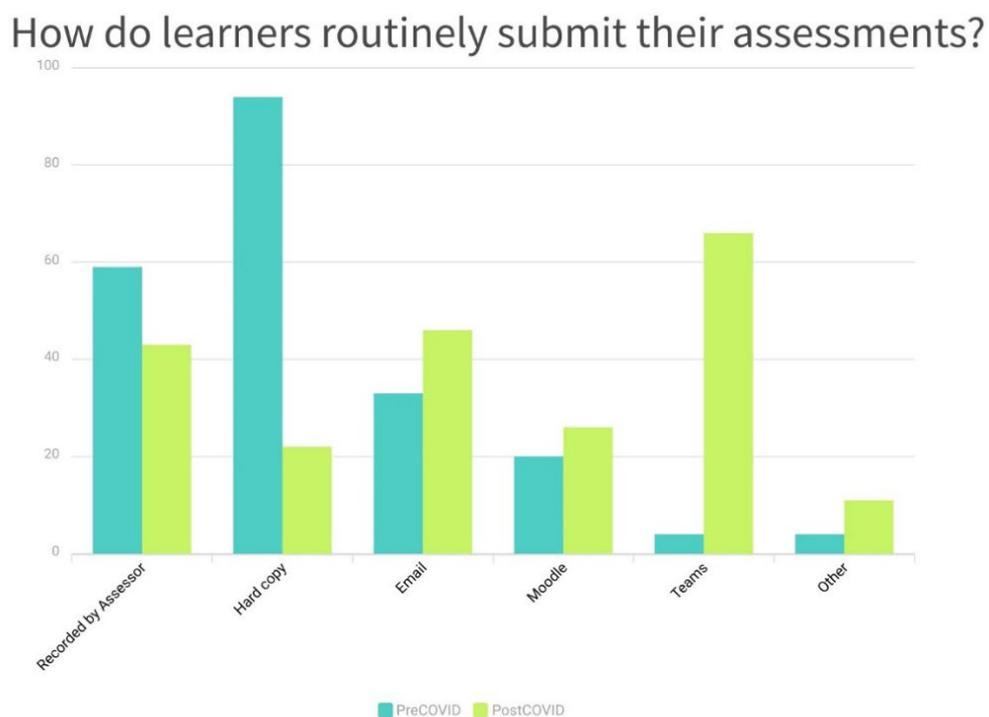


Figure 4.10 Comparison of common assessment submission processes pre and post the COVID pandemic

Online submission systems were described as being a support to students as well as for educators: “Less stress for students printing out assignments. All assignments will always be submitted online from now on, no hard copies.” This sentiment is mirrored in the findings of a recent survey by QQI, examining how COVID impacted teaching, learning and assessment in the Irish Further Education sector, which found that educators preferred the online tools for provision of feedback and submission of assessments and would like to retain these practices (QQI, 2020). Procedures governing assessment in the sector tend to include the necessity for students to sign submission and authorship statements for every assessment submitted. Sector wide discussion is needed to harness the valuable advancements that have occurred, as electronic mechanisms provide significant opportunities for the reduction in administrative burdens in areas such as this. For example, guidance for staff on acceptable electronic receipting of evidence is now required so that unnecessary bureaucracy is removed from the system.

Published research has identified that educators also find that new technologies are simply ‘bolted on’ to old processes, without any critical analysis of the process and what it is intended to achieve (Ferrell, 2014). Open and authentic conversations between managers, administrators and with assessors as active, central contributors is now required to maximise the organisation and quality assurance improvements that have been accelerated out of necessity in response to a global health crisis. The time to act is now.

In addition to the streamlining and managing of the process of assessment, participants also mentioned the enhanced teaching and learning supports and opportunities that technology facilitated:

A twofold benefit, one for learners who would be learning new digital skills and for me the tutor I feel it is a great way to be creative with assessments (once the go ahead if given by QA) and make the assessment process less stressful for learners.

Benefits such as those mentioned in the above participant quotations align with the strategic priorities relating to accessibility in the sector (SOLAS, 2020a) and more specifically the principles of

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that are currently being heavily promoted (Quirke & McCarthy, 2020). Clear learning pathways for example support students to engage by allowing them to map and track their progress, while also increasing their levels of autonomy.

#### ePortfolios for Assessment

Portfolios of assessment in Further Education are unique artefacts. Each portfolio contains all assessment evidence for a student in a particular module, prepared in response to assessment briefs designed by the assessor, that are based on QQIs approved assessment techniques, which include but are not limited to examination, assignment and skills demonstration (QQI, 2018). Also included in each portfolio, is the corresponding quality assurance documentation. All portfolios of assessment must be presented by assessors for the authentication process of internal verification. While this is the case, it is unclear where the responsibility for assembling the portfolio of assessment lies. Survey results indicate that 33% of assessors fully compile the student portfolios, in contrast to the 11% of assessors who reported that they were fully compiled by the student (Figure 4.11).

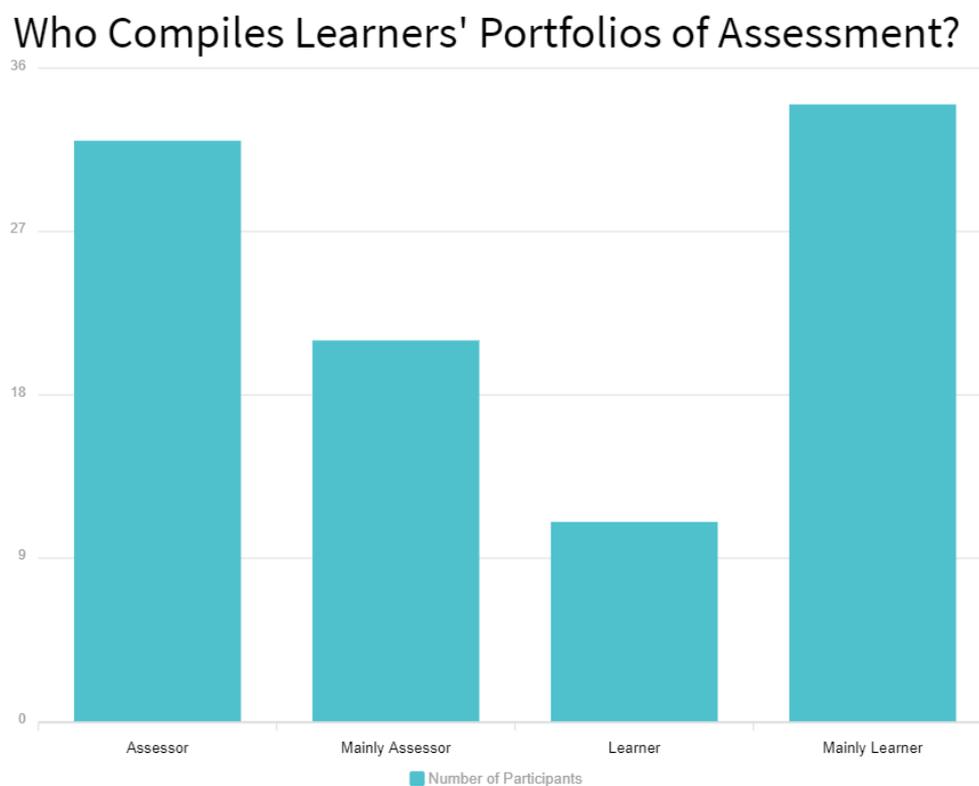


Figure 4.11 Responsibilities for compilation of portfolios of assessment in modules assessed by survey respondents

This finding was not surprising, for a number of reasons. Firstly, when each assessment is submitted by students, the material and its secure storage becomes the responsibility of the assessor (ETBI, 2018), meaning that the student does not have direct access to completed assessment pieces post submission. In addition, students would require high levels of support to compile their assessments and all of the accompanying paperwork such as briefs, signed submission statements and marking/feedback sheets. This is something that requires further exploration.

Prior to COVID-19 and its associated restrictions, 41% of survey participants and their students had presented at least some assessment content digitally. However, out of this cohort, only 36% (or eighteen respondents) had submitted the entire assessment portfolios electronically, whereas the others had presented digital content on a device, as an accompanying artefact alongside a paper-based portfolio. The numbers of respondents submitting either partial or complete evidence for authentication prior to the pandemic are visible in Figure 4.12 below. This confirms that the process is overwhelmingly a paper-based exercise (for 83% of respondents), with portfolios being packed with paperwork and presented physically for internal verification and external authentication.

## How was digital assessment evidence presented?

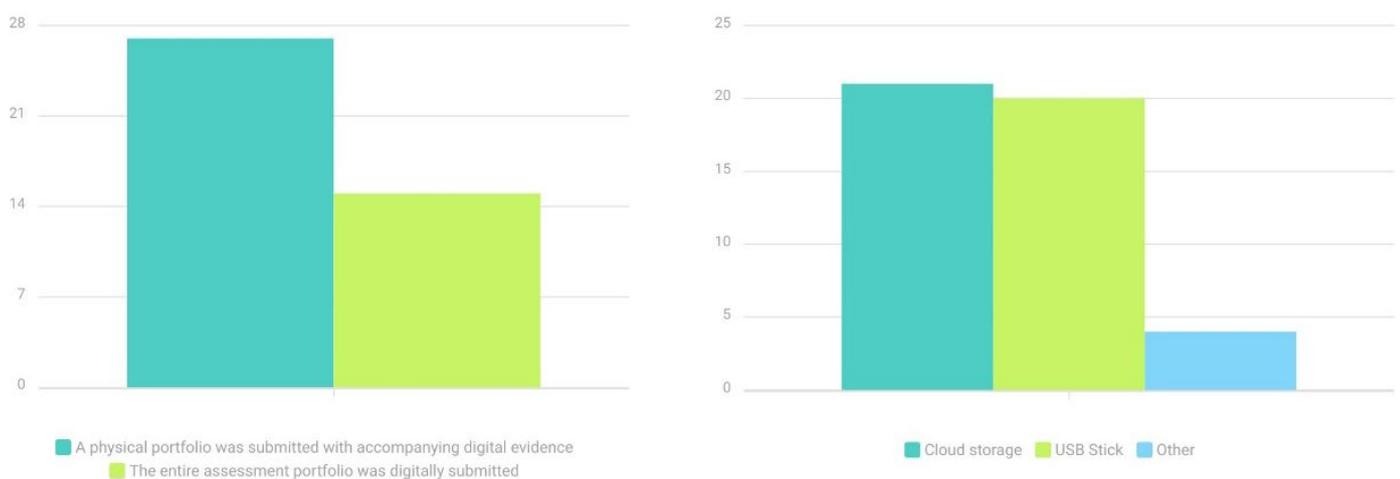


Figure 4.12 The number of respondents who had submitted electronic assessment evidence for the authentication process prior to the pandemic (Left panel) and the method of electronic presentation used (Right panel)

Looking at current and potential future practice, the use of ePortfolios were specifically mentioned by thirteen survey participants when asked how assessment portfolios were submitted for authentication during COVID restrictions and how technology could further support them in their role of assessor. The majority of comments were very positive, with stated benefits of ePortfolios including: “The use of electronic portfolios will help efficiency, quality, uniformity throughout the organisation”. Other participants expressed concern about the number of new digital assessment options being presented to staff, such as Moodle, Microsoft Teams and ePortfolios and a lack of consistency in approaches. It is suggested that “one system across the ETB sector should be introduced”.

A study by Bennett et al. (2017) provided evidence that teachers can find ePortfolios a quicker way to mark and easier to manage relative to some other assessment methods. Another study by Almpanis (2015) highlighted similar efficiencies resulting from the use of ePortfolios, with a particular reference to reduced demands on staff time. However, the emergency move to online provision in recent times meant that the majority of assessors found themselves forced to make alternative assessment arrangements, with no time for preparation or planning for electronic portfolios or submissions. Indeed, the survey responses highlight that where any online system had been used to present evidence during COVID, the participants who had clear structures in place found the process a positive experience, even given the difficult circumstances. In contrast to this, participants who had not been provided with clear guidelines and support found this stressful, difficult and time consuming. The responses below in Figure 4.13 highlight some of the contrasting experiences of preparing both digital and paper-based assessment portfolios during the pandemic.

## Compilation and Submission of Portfolios of Assessment During a Global Pandemic

*I am assembling portfolios from strings of emails etc.. time consuming.*

*Hard copies compiled before lockdown were added to by submission by learners through Google Drive. These were printed out by teachers at home, marked and added to portfolio.*

*Completion of the assessment portfolio was deferred until September.*

*Most of the work in hard copy in centre. From March onwards work collected by email and put in electronic folders. A nightmare to collect! EA had to view both hard copy and digital files.*

*All work before was in hard copy and had to be pdf'd for the EAs. Literally hundreds of pages to be scanned. It was an absolute nightmare.*

*Because I was already 95% online/digital submissions already - it was fine for me. Was a big struggle & steep learning curve for many.*

*I feel that all assessment processes were completed as well as - or perhaps even better than pre Covid.*

*Clear guidance was provided by our Quality department in this and solutions put in place.*

*With difficulty. No onedrive teams etc. Submitted by email. Problem with large files so usbs had to be posted.*

Figure 4.13 Variety of responses explaining how the compilation and submission of portfolios of assessment for IV and EA was carried out during the emergency COVID restrictions in 2020.

The untapped potential of technology for assessment is now being realised and further research is required to capture the valuable learning that has occurred among practitioners. The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions it placed on long established practices, did present an opportunity for accelerated and innovative change. During this time, colleagues and I developed an ePortfolio system, designed to meet the needs of assessment practices and processes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and with quality assurance at its core. Having implemented this system last year, it was recently rolled out to a larger number of staff on a voluntary basis, in a pilot phase. A small focus group of pilot phase participants was organised in order to explore the impact of the ePortfolio project and to add additional depth and colour to the themes identified in the survey. The findings are presented and discussed below.

### Phase 2: Focus Group- Exploring a Way Forward with ePortfolios

The focus group made up of four participants was designed to triangulate and provide added richness and depth to the survey themes. In addition, ways in which the template and system (see Appendix A) designed as part of the ePortfolio project may help or hinder aspects of the assessment process was also explored. The focus was on how to best move forward and to make improvements in the future. Three areas were identified as key themes in this regard and these are outlined in Figure 3.14 and are discussed as part of an overview of the focus group findings below.

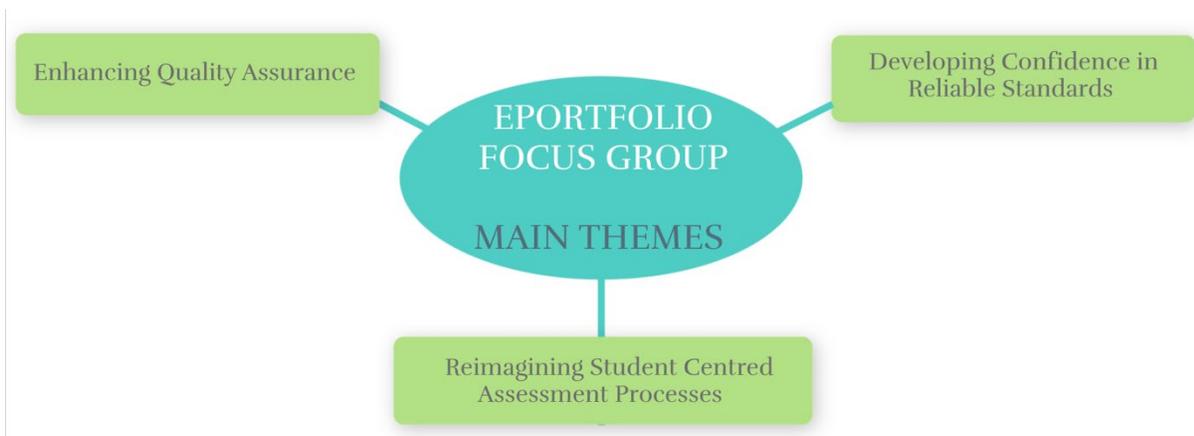


Figure 3.14 Main themes identified using thematic analysis of focus group transcripts

### *A way forward with ePortfolios*

All three of the key survey themes were supported by the opinions of all focus group participants, supporting the triangulation of the study findings (Caillaud & Flick, 2017). Issues of excessive administrative burdens that lack clear purpose were discussed. The use of ePortfolios was described as going some way to reducing this burden. Again, comments by participants illustrated that their complaints are not simply about the amount of work the current system demands, it is that because what is being asked of them feels senseless. Instead, they want an enhanced quality system that is more authentic. The following response highlights this:

Where's the focus on the actual teaching and learning? Hopefully the ePortfolio changes this, because since we've started using it, there's less emphasis on the tick box exercises...It just makes sense. And it's not to be getting out of any work, because like we've all just mentioned, these tick box exercises are just a waste of time.

Inauthenticity in the process comes up several times. The following participant names a key issue as a perceived lack of trust in educators in the sector, stating:

We were constantly giving (students) feedback in person, in real time. There's no trust in the tutor that you are providing feedback. It's meaningless writing on a form that you have given a student feedback, because that may or may not be true. It proves nothing.

Trust and accountability are inextricably linked, and recent research featuring the higher education sector describe how bureaucratic accountability can burden educators with administrative reporting, which does not contribute to any improvements to quality (Ehren et al., 2019). Only when there is open and genuine conversation about the quality of assessment can there be a meaningful discussion about change. For this to occur, FE tutors must be trusted to fulfil more of their core roles without surface level monitoring and to be active participants in a deep and meaningful conversation about quality.

The ePortfolio project promoted open discussion about assessment processes among educators. Some of the participants found this very valuable. One participant also felt more confident about their role in the process when using the new system:

I've gotten one ePortfolio ready for IV and I feel a great sense of confidence. Whereas usually, I'm worried because I could be missing a whole section. I love the organisation of it, and I'm really enjoying it and the community of practice is just brilliant and I hope it keeps going.

Opportunities such as this voluntary pilot allow for professional development, peer learning and a genuine improvement in quality, with a supportive framework for educators. While professional development has traditionally been delivered by external agencies, research and experience has demonstrated that professional learning is often best located “in house” where educators can focus on problems and improvements in areas of relevant practice, while offering support and opportunities to learn from each other (Hara, 2009). Other studies have also acknowledged the potential of similar “technology in education projects” for staff, as being an important spark for professional learning (Ambler et al., 2014). The knowledge and expertise held by professionals within an organisation, who have the added understanding of local policies, practices and student needs cannot be bought (Lieberman & Miller, 2011).

The focus group conversation also dealt extensively with the issues of assessor confidence regarding reliability and consistency of standards in the sector. While suggestions for models that would help ensure consistency of assessment are available to view on the Further Education Support Service website (Further Education Support Service, 2015), concerns about reliability were clearly articulated in this and previous research in this area (Fitzsimons, 2017). All focus group participants also highlighted this as an area of concern, with none having cross-moderated student submissions in the past. Multiple ideas regarding how improvements could be made in this area were explored. The group felt that a move to ePortfolios from the paper-based system provided multiple opportunities that were previously

impractical. These included the sharing of exemplar ePortfolios for various disciplines and to represent a range of grades and assessment review meetings, similar to those held at both second and higher-level institutions that enable educators to collaboratively reach consistency in their judgments of student work (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2019; Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013). Previously, this idea would have been very challenging, with small education centres and colleges often having only one tutor per academic discipline, making in house cross moderation virtually impossible. Looking further afield, moderation across colleges or providers was highly impractical, with moving and transporting boxes of student assessment folders logistically difficult and problematic from a security point of view. One idea put forward by a participant and strongly endorsed by all others was *"if we compiled fictitious ePortfolios with different pieces of work, and then got a small focus group to all grade them using the same marking schemes and see what the results are."* This suggestion was thought to be the most constructive and collegial starting point, in a sector where there is little precedence for second marking and for assessors whom initially may feel vulnerable about cross moderation activities.

Finally, from the focus group discussion it seemed that the move to ePortfolios provided benefits for students in managing and having autonomy over their learning. For example, they were able to see their marks and map their overall progress. One respondent noted that "students are able to go back into the ePortfolio and go, 'oh, yeah, I'm on task for that or I have to up my game for that'". It was identified by several participants that the portfolio structure was a support to students allowing "...students to see the empty pages and where they need to fill in and what they're missing. They were able to tell me exactly what they were missing, which is unreal". It also supported the continuity of assessment and gave students a greater opportunity to learn from the process with one participant remarking: "I've been able to correct as I go, and then I've put all their feedback up, they've got it straightaway and then when they come to their next assignment, they're ready."

These comments highlight that the ePortfolio model may elevate the value of the assessment as and for learning, allowing greater opportunity for students to use ongoing assessment and feedback as opportunities to improve and to monitor their own learning, with a greater understanding of assessment criteria (Earl, 2007). These improvements in student experience are important examples of quality enhancement in assessment. Not only do they align with the principles of Universal Design, but they suggest that the ePortfolio model has the potential to strengthen the constructivist, learner-centred process of assessment that it was intended to support (Wolf, 1998). If portfolios are to remain as a primary feature of assessment and authentication in the sector, this is an area that warrants further exploration and analysis in the near future.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented and discussed the findings of this research study. Key themes that capture educators' experiences of Quality Assured Assessment have been explored in the context of both the pre and post COVID world. Analysis of the data allowed for the identification of issues with some quality assurance practices while identifying others that led to tangible quality improvements from the perspective of the educators who teach and assess students. Insights from a pilot project, implementing ePortfolios of Assessment have provided additional depth to these findings, while also allowing for the triangulation of data. Importantly, suggestions and opportunities for improvement and enhanced quality that are fitting for an innovative, creative, and progressive 21<sup>st</sup> century Further Education sector have been investigated.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Perspectives

### Introduction

It is an exciting time for the Further Education sector. Its ongoing transformation is multifaceted, driven by various factors, including significant structural reform and a focus on improvements in performance and quality. Due to this, and the more recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the assessment process in FE, has come under renewed focus. This dissertation analysed the FE assessment process from the perspective of critical actors, namely the assessors. Under investigation was the research question “What are assessors’ experiences of Quality Assured Assessment in Further Education and how does the use of ePortfolios of Assessment impact this process?” This question was addressed using a mixed methods sequential research design, which allowed for both a broad understanding and an in-depth investigation of the issues. The main findings, as discussed in the previous chapter, centre around several key themes, that provide insights into the realities of assessment processes, as experienced by educators themselves. The findings of this study present opportunities to learn from contemporary practices and to support enhancements in the future.

This final chapter summarises the main findings of the study, outlines important implications for the sector, whilst also acknowledging the limitations of this research together with potential areas for further investigation. It is hoped that these contributions to the academic literature can inform the development of future practice and policy in a progressive, diverse, and innovative Further Education sector, fitting for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

### Study Conclusions

To answer the research question, it was first important to establish assessors’ experiences of Quality Assured Assessment in the sector. The results underline that educators care about quality and value the contributions of quality assurance to improvements in their practice. Involving teaching staff

has been found to support the development of a quality culture (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Lucander & Christersson, 2020). However, the research uncovered multiple perspectives on the specific processes implemented to manage and quality assure assessment. It was clear that the viewpoint of educators was influenced by the nature of their experience. These ranged from collegial, transparent, and constructive to managerialist, bureaucratic and illogical. Some of these findings align strongly with literature in this area, with bureaucratic processes and contradictory experiences also highlighted by other researchers in the Irish context (Fitzsimons, 2017; Twomey, 2020).

An analysis of educators' experiences also identified the impact of assessment processes on their confidence in these areas. Importantly, confidence appears to be, in part, based on playing an active role in the authentication process. For example, those with experience of being an internal verifier or external authenticator were significantly more likely to strongly agree that their assessment strategy is fully compliant with quality assurance requirements. Conversely, a lack of confidence was more apparent for educators who felt removed or unfamiliar with the process. This was particularly evident for new teachers, with both qualitative and quantitative results supporting this finding. The provision of additional support for assessors, in particularly newly qualified teachers was suggested by several participants. Establishing a strong assessor identity is important because it encompasses assessor confidence and self-efficacy and will also help inform how teachers engage in assessment work with students (Looney et al., 2017).

This has been a particularly interesting time to explore the use and potential impact of technology given the context of this research, being carried out during a period of rapid uptake of technology enhanced assessment, instigated out of necessity due to the global pandemic. Considering the negative conditions and, in many ways the lack of choice underpinning this sudden uptake of technology, it was interesting that most participants were very positive about its impact. Technology was found to be an organisational support to assessors, reducing the administrative burden of managing

assessment and their quality assurance obligations. For example, survey results identified that while most student assessment submissions were paper-based pre-pandemic, many assessors have now embraced digital receipt of submissions. This raises new questions regarding how assessment evidence should be presented for authentication. Should all this evidence really be retrospectively printed by assessors and/or students and bound in a portfolio for the sake of this process alone? While information was not sought in relation to ePortfolios in the survey, multiple respondents commented about their potential, particularly in delivering improved efficiencies and enhanced quality.

To fully address the research question, the impact of implementing ePortfolios for assessment this year was explored in a small focus group of four educators. This followed the design of the ePortfolio template by colleagues and I, with the aim of streamlining and improving the assessment process. Participants indicated that the use of the template and the connection with the community of educators involved in the ePortfolio project led to quality enhancement in their practices and an increased level of confidence regarding assessment processes. Opportunities for the use of assessment ePortfolios to improve assessor knowledge and confidence in the application of national standards were also discussed. Some of the practical recommendations made in this regard are discussed further below. In addition, as expected from a group of educators, some of the main benefits or improvements that supported their students were also discussed. The transition to ePortfolios provided benefits for students in managing and having autonomy over their learning. This suggests that the ePortfolio model, with its 21<sup>st</sup> century learning design, has the potential to bolster learner-centred assessment, increasing learner involvement and understanding of assessment processes.

## Implications and Recommendations for Practice

### **1. Knowing the standard**

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 obliges Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to issue guidelines for providers to inform their development of quality

assurance procedures(QQI, 2016). However, individual providers or even individual colleges and centres could take more immediate action to address concerns about consistency of standards, regardless of current national guidelines. Providers could look at international good practice in assuring the validity and reliability of assessment and implement such approaches. In addition, the further education support service website provides a short guide on “Ensuring Consistency of Assessment across Centres” (Further Education Support Service, 2015). This contains suggested models, including the appointment of lead assessors and the hosting of moderation meetings across centres in a multicentre provider. However, other suggestions were provided by participants of the survey and focus group in this study that may be more useful for a first tentative move towards a system of consistent quality standards. These included the design of exemplar portfolios in a range of modules and anonymous second marking activities. These approaches could be educator led to ensure a supportive and collegial experience. In addition, the findings from this research have identified the growth in confidence in quality assurance and more specifically, “knowing the standard” that participation in the authentication process has provided to assessors. In particular, the responses of many educators who had experience of being internal verifiers underlined the value of involvement in this process. While internal verification does not involve the moderation of standards, it does provide the verifier with a rare glimpse of the grading standards set by other educators. As a result, it is recommended that opportunities for educators to act as internal verifiers should be encouraged and supported by management of programmes and providers.

Limitations in the system can now be addressed using technology and COVID 19 has brought about a “can do” attitude and a renewed sense of motivation. Whereas benchmarking and cross moderation was previously difficult, as colleges or centres may not have multiple members of staff with expertise in the same areas, groups of subject matter experts are now able to meet and collaborate online. The movement to electronic portfolios would also go a long way to addressing many of the logistical challenges, with the sharing of assessment material being secure, rapid and not limited by location.

## **2. Proposed ePortfolio model for Further Education**

Results from the focus group of this study suggest that the use of ePortfolios may support students learning and assessment. Based on these results, and before the next phase of the ePortfolio project begins, this is worthy of further exploration. Below is an outline of a proposed new model of ePortfolios for Further Education. This model extends beyond being a vehicle for assessment evidence and instead would include all material relating to teaching, learning and assessment. In doing this, the student regains control of the scaffolding and compilation of their assessment material while being able to view it in the context of their entire learning journey. This supports the learner-centred and participative pedagogical approach in the sector (SOLAS, 2014). Elements of the model that support teaching and learning will include a collaboration space, where group work can be completed by multiple students, reflective log spaces for students to document their learning process and a greatly increased bank of accessible content. Built in digital tools have the capability to read text aloud, to translate text into multiple languages and to allow students to dictate their ideas and have them converted to written text by the ePortfolio. In addition, it supports the presentation of content in a variety of formats all on the same page. For example, a video could accompany a PowerPoint slide deck (maintaining all their functionality) and a page of typed notes, providing students with choice and variety that is easy to access. This approach would fully align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning, which is currently being promoted as a strategy to support learning and diversity in the sector (Quirke & McCarthy, 2020). Finally, the use of the eportfolio model would have benefits that fall outside of the modules learning outcomes. It would support them in building digital skills, an important aspect of all modern quality education and vital for their futures. It would also foster autonomy and student-centred learning, supporting assessment as a process, rather than it being viewed simply as a product. An overview of the benefits of this model is available below in Figure 5.1.

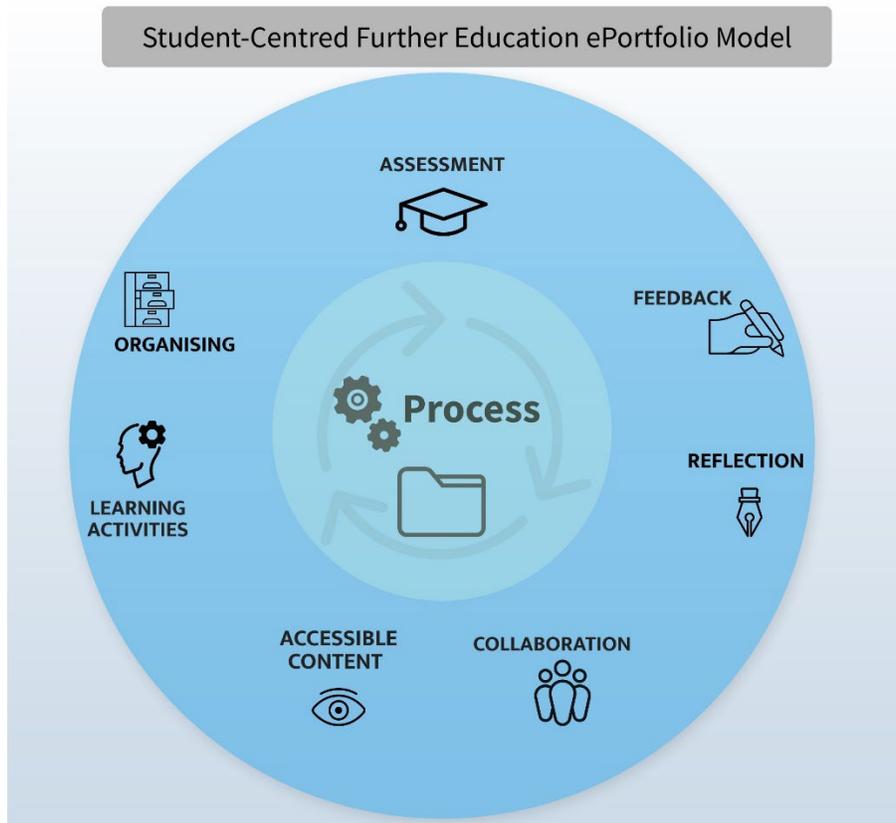


Figure 5.1 Proposed ePortfolio model for Further Education Sector, to support student-centred teaching learning and assessment

The other function of the existing portfolios in the sector is to support the authentication of the assessment process. This ePortfolio model would contain an assessment section, retaining the current design as featured in this research. Students would be involved in the management and presentation of this section, which will represent their product and showcase of assessment material. This would greatly reduce the administrative burden associated with quality assurance measures, as it would become a more authentic process of continuous assessment and quality. It would be updated continuously with assessment submissions as well as with feedback and grading that would always be visible and available to students. This would greatly increase transparency in the process, with all marking schemes and feedback available to students in real time. This would improve current practices were physical

portfolios of assessment must be securely retained by assessors and only available to students sporadically.

The final step, when the students' work is completed and their portfolios of assessment are ready for internal verification and external authentication, is now markedly simplified and streamlined. The assessment section of the ePortfolio can simply be copied and isolated for authentication. This would mirror the ePortfolio for assessment as researched in this dissertation and would represent the product of quality assured assessment that requires presentation for authentication. An overview of how this model would support student-centred teaching, learning and assessment; as well as the quality assurance process of authentication is shown below in Figure 5.2. This potential approach is currently being explored in practice at programme level and is something that may be of interest to other educators. Future research will be vital in order to examine the impact of this model and its associated benefits and limitations for both staff and students.

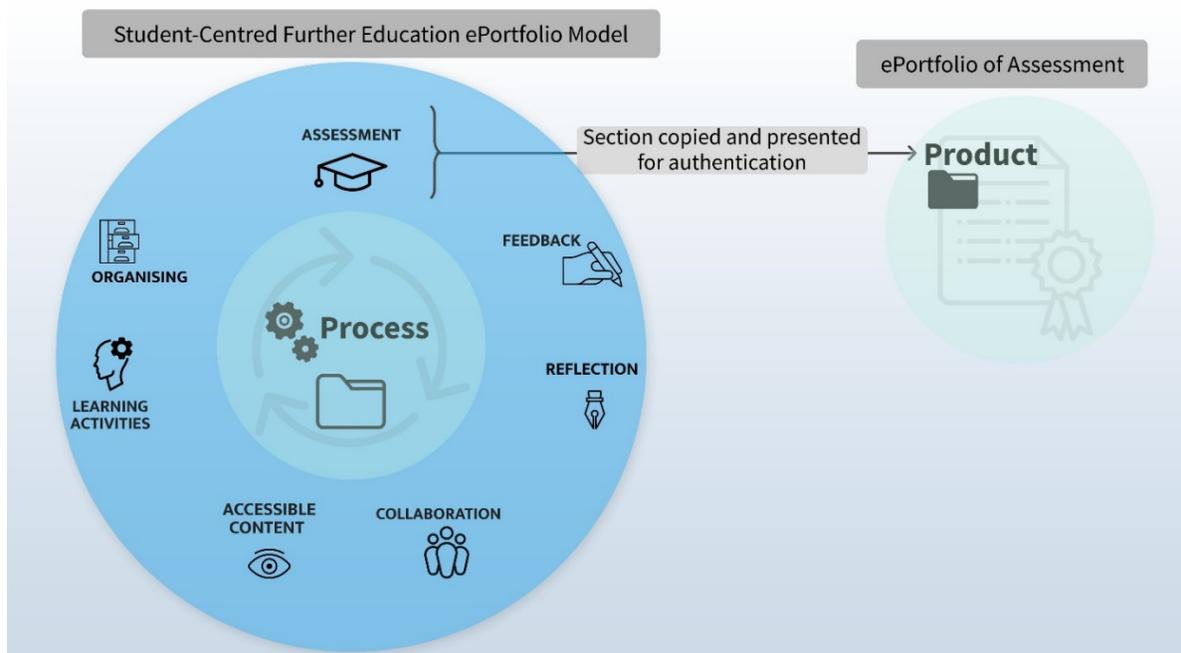


Figure 5.2 Proposed ePortfolio model for Further Education Sector, to support student-centred teaching learning and assessment and the quality assurance process of authentication

## Implications and Recommendations for Policy

### **1. Quality, not Quantity**

The further education sector has an assessment quality assurance system that is administratively heavy. Currently, portfolios are necessary to support the sectors' authentication process and assessors must present portfolios for every student in every module (Further Education Support Service, n.d.). This contrasts with quality systems in other education sectors. An opportunity to learn from quality assurance processes that are practiced at second and higher level may be worth considering. Common assessment practice at higher level involves second marking and attendance at marking meetings to assure consistency (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013). Similarly, the newly devised Junior Certificate classroom-based assessment system is supported by teachers attending Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings that enable teachers to collaboratively reach consistency in their judgments of student work ((NCCA), n.d.). If similar systems were implemented in FE, it would not only support assessors in making assessment judgements, but it could also allow for a scale back on external moderation, where a sample of student work, rather than all, could instead be provided by assessors. This would require a level of trust in FE educators. However, with the ongoing professionalisation in the sector, including the requirement of mandatory educational qualifications for registration with the Teaching Council, their professional identity must now be recognised and respected.

### **2. Quality requires consistency**

In practice, under the current system, moderation lies solely with external authenticators. This is because assessors do not have the opportunity to benchmark their assessment judgements. While important recommendations for practice have been made above in relation to this issue, policy changes would ensure that marking is more consistent nationally. Concerns about reliability and consistency of standards have now been identified in multiples academic studies (Fitzsimons, 2017).

Moreover, QQI (2018) have themselves determined that:

“..designing and implementing summative assessment procedures and tasks that are: a) valid and reliable for the purposes of certification; b) nationally consistent; c) fair and suitable for use in competitive allocation of places in higher education; may be, realistically, we suspect, beyond the unaided capabilities of many providers under the current arrangements.”

As QQI embarks on their first inaugural quality reviews of FE providers this year, it is recommended that the sector engages in policy discussions with the agency with the aim of meaningfully addressing this important issue.

### **3. Teacher Education**

One of the survey subthemes indicated that teachers lacked confidence and understanding regarding the quality assurance system and making reliable judgements of assessment standards. This highlights a need for targeted professional learning and development opportunities for all staff involved in the administration and management of assessment and authentication processes. One of the three high level goals of the current FET professional learning and development strategy is to build capacity, which will require identifying “ongoing needs to develop the confidence and capability of FET practitioners” (SOLAS and ETBI, 2020). This research has identified quality assurance of assessment and the judgement of assessment standards as priority areas. In addition, a strong recommendation from this research is that information regarding these two areas of assessment should form part of the assessment modules in the teacher training courses, recognised by the Teaching Council. Useful coursework could include an examination of standards and exemplars, as well as group marking activities. It is useful to note that training courses are available to internal assessors in the contemporary vocational education sector in the United Kingdom (Education and Training Foundation, n.d.). For assessors judging knowledge and/or skills using assessment techniques similar to those used in FE in Ireland, the entry level qualification involves 100 hours of study and is equivalent to a QQI Level 5

qualification (The Teacher Trainer, n.d.). Course content includes all aspects of vocational assessment, with outcomes to include an understanding of how to make assessment decisions and of quality assurance.

## Limitations and Implications for Further Research

### **1. Rapid change**

Quality assurance is an area of rapid change in the sector. It is important to acknowledge that many current policies and procedures reflect the evolving nature of quality assurance, as the sector continues to integrate legacy processes inherited from now disbanded bodies such as FETAC (QQI, 2015). Only in very recent months have QQI began their first ever external review of Further Education provider's quality assurance procedures. As a result, a large amount of work is currently underway by providers in this area. It will be important to view this research in this context, and that future research is carefully designed to capture changes to evolving policy and practice.

### **2. ePortfolio research for the future**

Further research is required to examine the use of ePortfolios in the sector. As this was the first pilot phase of the ePortfolio for assessment, only initial qualitative data was available for analysis. The convening of a focus group maximised the potential to capture rich experiences of participants. Due to the time constraints of this project, it was not possible to examine the uptake of the ePortfolio project model over a longer period. In addition, there is no information available to indicate potential acceptance levels of ePortfolios generally across the entire population of FE educators without further research. If uptake of the model increases, future studies could examine its impact from a quantitative standpoint, measuring outcomes and improvements that could be supported by statistical analysis. It was also not possible to examine the impact of the ePortfolio design on the educators acting as authenticators, who would also be predominantly familiar with a paper-based system. Currently, external authenticator reports are being generated based on ePortfolio submissions and their feedback

on the model will be invaluable. Finally, and most importantly, future research should focus on the student experience of ePortfolio use and how it impacts their relationship with assessment.

## Conclusion

Less than one year ago, a new Department of Further and Higher Education was established in Ireland. The new Minister outlined his intention to support a fully integrated third level sector and has noted that the current system “has failed to recognise the brilliance of further education and training” (*Third-Level Funding ‘Ducked and Dodged’ for Too Long, Says Harris, 2021*). The further education model provides an alternative but parallel pathway to educational achievement and has much to be proud of. In education systems, assessment directly impacts learning and the overall experience of students while also providing the basis for certification of awards (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2018). It is crucial that as the Further Education and Training system continues to evolve at pace, that quality, integrity and learner experience are at its core. This research demonstrates that there is much to be learned by listening to the voices of practitioners, who are central to assessment. Educators know the true impact of assessment on the students that the sector is there to serve. They are also crucial contributors to the organisational processes designed to assure assessment meets the national standard.

**“Where there is no question of a problem to be solved or a difficulty to be surmounted, the course of suggestions flows on at random.” (Dewey, 1910, p. 11)**

The recent trend to embrace new innovative approaches to assessment, precipitated by a global pandemic has displayed the pragmatic approach of educators to act. Practice based innovations demonstrate that by constantly asking “why” of process, practitioners can find inventive solutions. When open minded educators who are passionate about assessment, quality and learner experience come together, the foundations of change are born. It is hoped that this research contributes and supports an authentic and inclusive academic discourse regarding quality enhancement of assessment at this pivotal time for the sector.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

### ePortfolio Template Overview

Click here for video overview of ePortfolio template (credit Ashley Stephens):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1axHFX-2aIA>

### Static images of ePortfolio template:

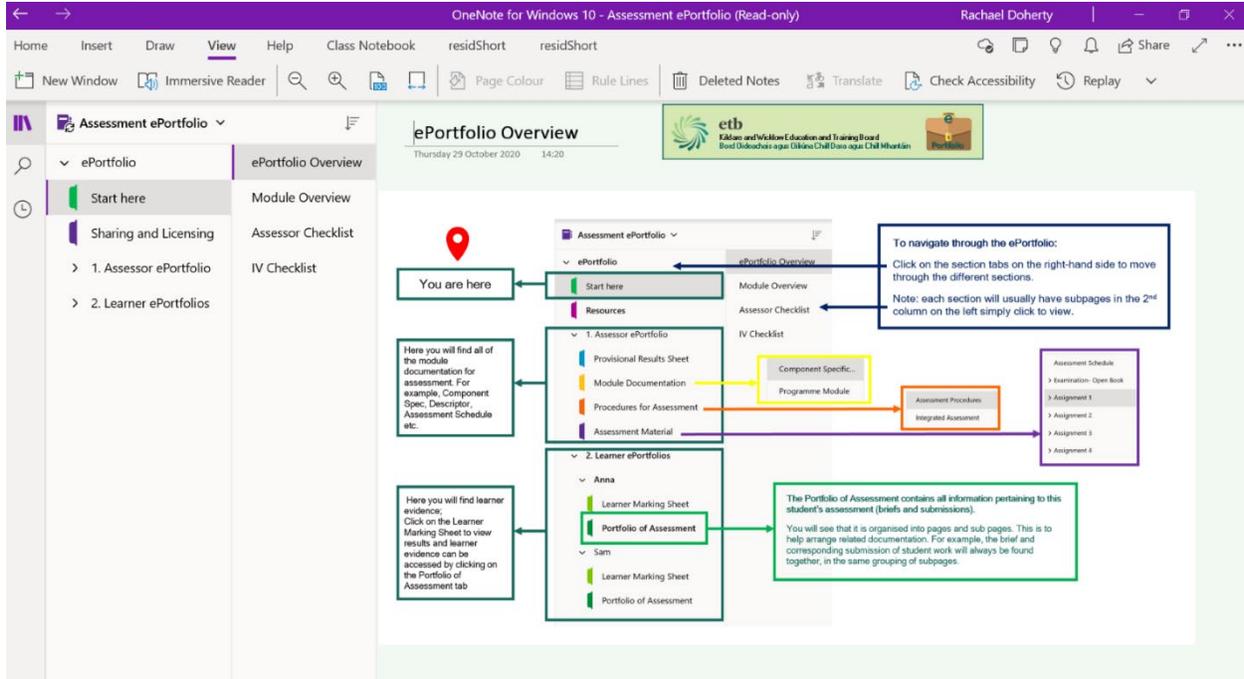


Figure A1: ePortfolio template navigation map showing standardised design and layout

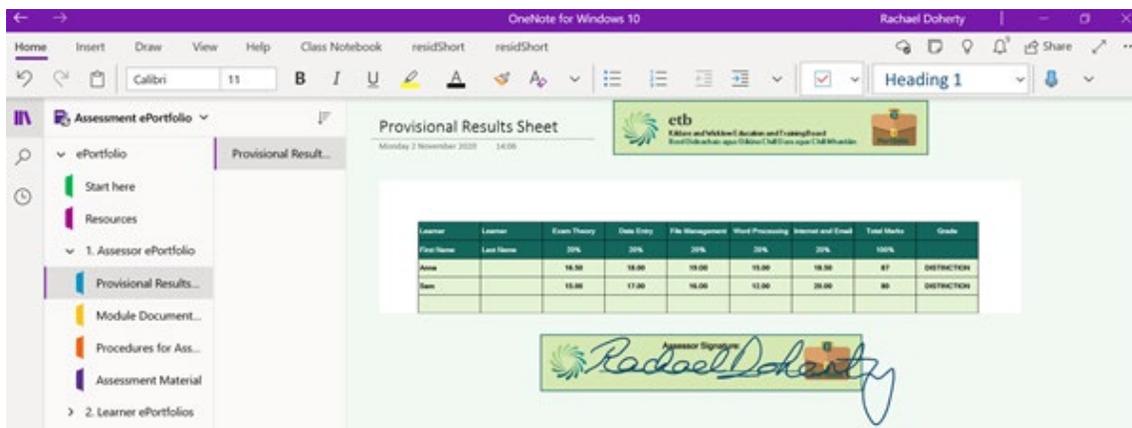


Figure A2: Assessor section of ePortfolio template showing provisional results sheet page

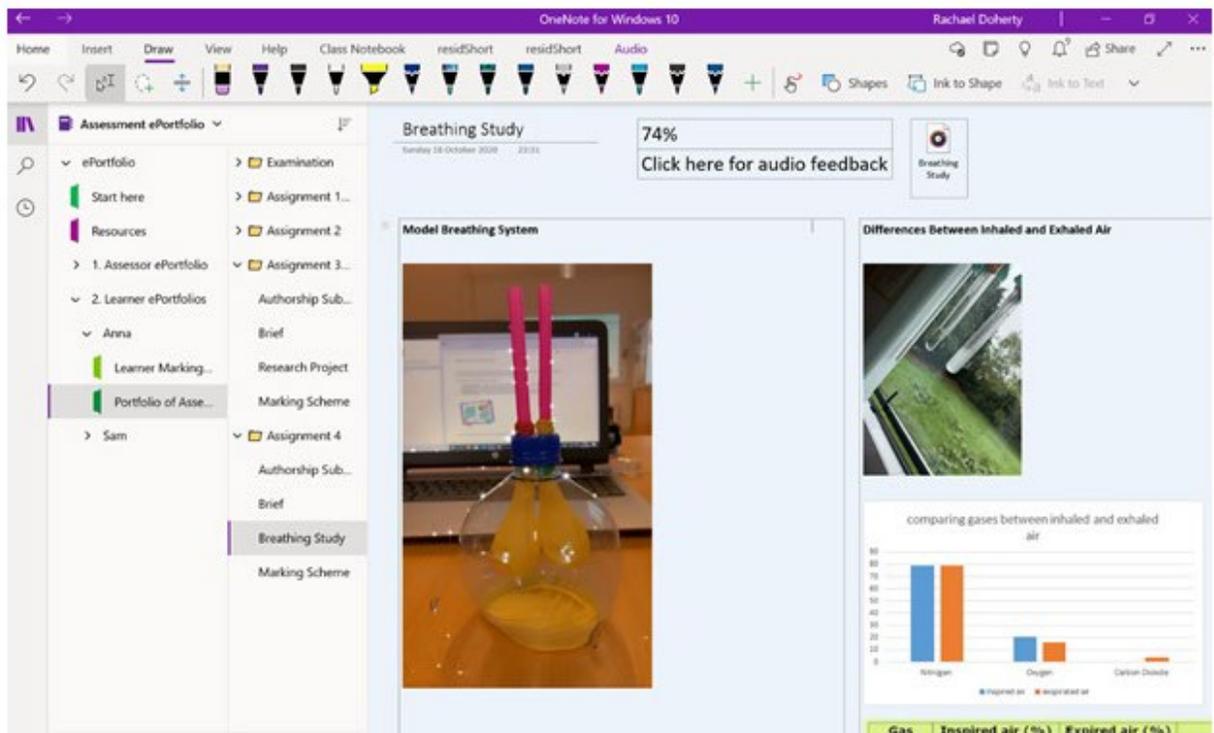
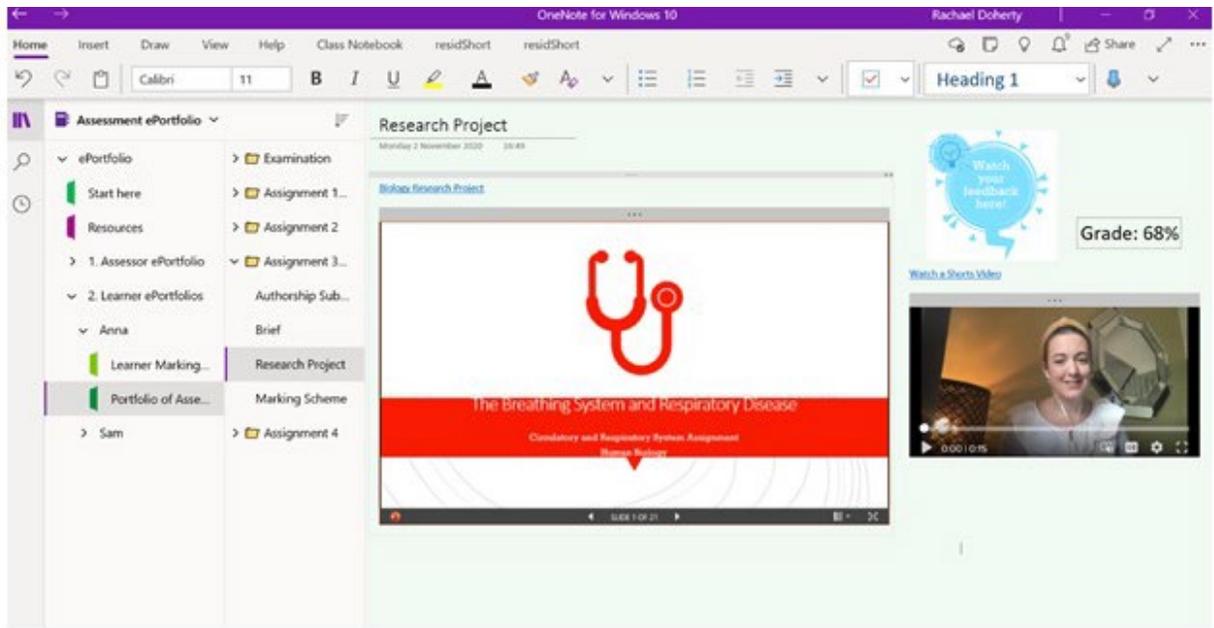


Figure A3: Overview of learner ePortfolio section showing two example pages of “Anna’s” assessment material and assessor feedback

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire Design

**Click here to view survey promotional material:**

<https://view.genial.ly/60645c16ccc9790cde59b51e>

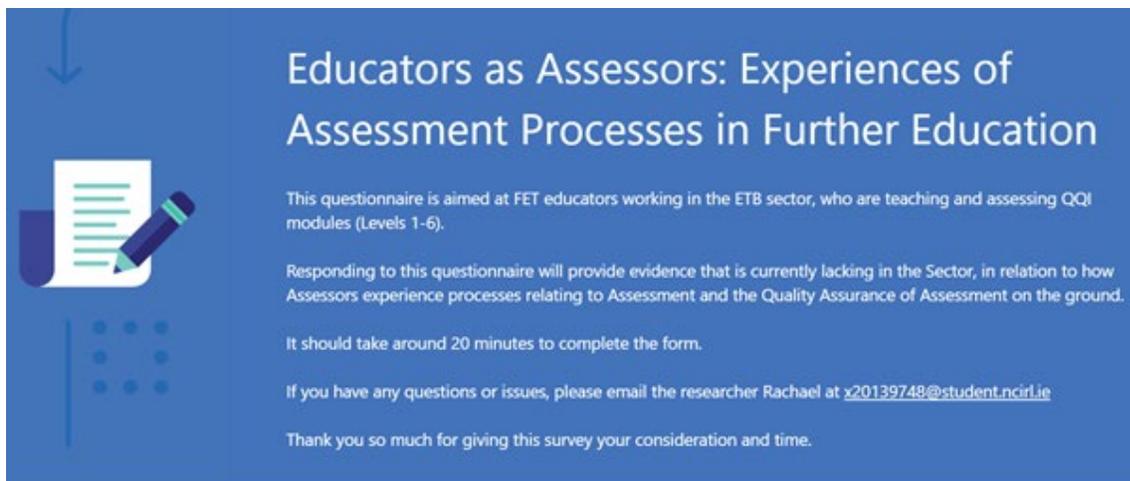
**Static image of survey promotional material:**



**Click here to view online survey:**

[https://forms.office.com/Pages/ShareFormPage.aspx?id=wUnbbnK\\_6k6LP6f9CiW2jN68FMKanQIDpQKXZPh146tURVRONE9MQUZPV09BRVdHT0NDOTZPMjJXOS4u&sharetoken=ypeeE3wfO8N5cbm0CH1x](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ShareFormPage.aspx?id=wUnbbnK_6k6LP6f9CiW2jN68FMKanQIDpQKXZPh146tURVRONE9MQUZPV09BRVdHT0NDOTZPMjJXOS4u&sharetoken=ypeeE3wfO8N5cbm0CH1x)

**Static image of survey “start” page:**



## Static text extracted from online questionnaire:

### 1. Consent

Please read the below information carefully and answer the associated questions to consent to participate:

Research Study Information:

#### I. RESEARCH STUDY TITLE

This study in which you are being invited to participate has the working title:

"How does the digital transformation of "Portfolios of Assessment" impact the experience of

Quality Assurance processes in the Further Education Sector?".

It is being undertaken by Rachael Doherty as part of a Masters in Educational Practice in the National College of Ireland.

#### II. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The study aims to advance knowledge and understanding of educators experience of Assessment Processes and the implementation of Quality Assurance processes. Ways in which a modern electronic portfolio system may support educators will also be examined.

#### III. CONFIRMATION OF PARTICULAR REQUIREMENTS

Participants in this research will be asked to answer a series of questions by clicking the answers most appropriate for them. For some questions, there will also be the opportunity to provide the researcher with more information. The questionnaire submissions will be anonymous in nature, so no personal data is collected from participants as a result of questionnaire submission.

#### IV. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participants' involvement in this study is totally voluntary.

#### V. ARRANGEMENTS TO PROTECT CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA

No personal data will be collected via the questionnaire. Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. All data held by the researchers will be stored in a secure location and destroyed after a period of 5 years.

1. Have you read the above information about this research and do you understand the information provided? \*

Yes

2. Do you consent to take part in this research project by completing this anonymous questionnaire? \*

Yes

## 2. Participant Details

Please answer the questions below

3. Which of the below options would best describe your area of specialism (from vocational experience or subject matter expertise)? \*

- Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary
- Arts and Humanities
- Business and Administration and Law
- Education
- Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction
- Health and Welfare
- Information and Communication Technologies
- Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics
- Other General Learning
- Services
- Social Sciences, Journalism and Information

4. Do you hold a formal teaching qualification? \*

- Yes
- No

5. Which of the following applies to you? \*

- I have a qualification for post-primary teaching
- I have a qualification for further education teaching
- Other

6. To what levels on the NFQ do you teach and assess? \*

- NFQ Level 1–2 or equivalent
- NFQ Level 3–4 or equivalent
- NFQ Level 5–6 or equivalent
- None

Other

7. Select the role(s) you have fulfilled in the Process of Assessment (at least once in the last 5 years) \*

- Assessor - practitioner who has responsibility for the assessment of learners
- Internal Verifier - checks that assessment procedures have been applied consistently across assessment activities
- External Authenticator - independently moderates assessment results for an award

8. What is your Length of Service as an Educator in the Further Education Sector? \*

- 5 years or less
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 15 years
- 16 - 20 years
- More than 20 years

9. How would you describe your gender? \*

- Prefer not to say
- Non-binary
- Male
- 

10. In what programme areas do you work? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY) \*

- Adult Basic Education
- BTEI
- Community Education
- Other
- PLC
- Prison Education
- Training
- VTOS
- Youthreach

11. In what programme area do you mainly work? (SELECT ONE ONLY) \*

- Adult Basic Education
- BTEI
- Community Education
- Other
- PLC
- Prison Education
- Training
- VTOS
- Youthreach

## Assessment in Training Services

12. In relation to the modules that you deliver, how are they assessed? \*

- Using LDA (Locally devised assessments, all assessment material is created by the assessor)
- Using AIS (Assessment instrument specifications, all assessment material is provided to the assessor)

13. Consider the following assessment principles. Rank them in order of their IMPORTANCE TO YOU. (Place most important at the top and least important at the bottom of the list. You can drag and drop or change the order using the arrows): \*

VALIDITY- the assessment measures the learning or skills in an appropriate way (practical skills are assessed practically etc)

RELIABILITY- the grades are reliable over time and between different learners (comparable between centres/ETBs etc)

FAIRNESS- processes before, during and after assessments are equitable (learner supports are available, they are well informed of the process etc)

QUALITY - national standards and the providers' quality assurance process (ensures credibility and integrity of awards)

TRANSPARENCY- clear guidelines to ensure clarity and understanding by all relevant stakeholders

COMPLEMENTARITY- the separate and distinct roles of the provider and QQI in relation to assessment (as outlined in Qualifications Act)

14. In the module(s) you deliver, rank the assessment principles in order of HOW STRONGLY YOU THINK THEY APPLY. (Place most applied principle at the top and least applied principle at the bottom of the list. You can drag and drop or change the order using the arrows): \*

VALIDITY- the assessment measures the learning or skills in an appropriate way (practical skills are assessed practically etc)

RELIABILITY- the grades are reliable over time and between different learners (comparable between centres/ETBs etc)

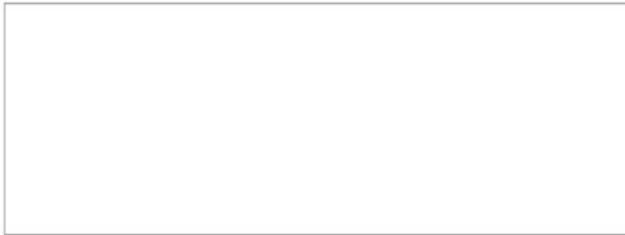
FAIRNESS- processes before, during and after assessments are equitable (learner supports are available, they are well informed of the process etc)

QUALITY - national standards and the providers' quality assurance process (ensures credibility and integrity of awards)

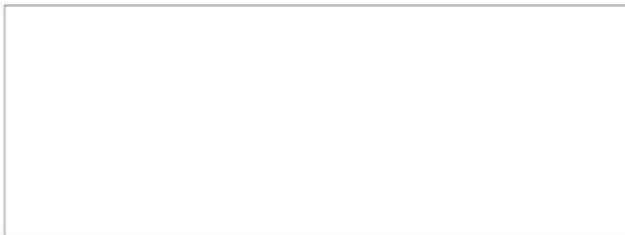
TRANSPARENCY- clear guidelines to ensure clarity and understanding by all relevant stakeholders

COMPLEMENTARITY- the separate and distinct roles of the provider and QQI in relation to assessment (as outlined in Qualifications Act)

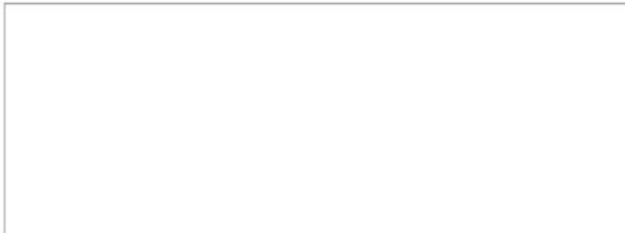
15. Please feel free to add any relevant comments about the application of the principles of assessment in your context:



16. How have your experiences of Internal Verification had an impact on your role as an Assessor? \*



17. How have your experiences of External Authentication had an impact on your role as an Assessor? \*



18. How you think that technology could further support you in your role as an assessor (and in carrying out the QA responsibilities that this role brings)? \*



### 3. Principles of Assessment

19. Consider the following assessment principles. Rank them in order of their **IMPORTANCE TO YOU**. (Place most important at the top and least important at the bottom of the list. You can drag and drop or change the order using the arrows): \*

VALIDITY- the assessment measures the learning or skills in an appropriate way (practical skills are assessed practically etc)

RELIABILITY- the grades are reliable over time and between different learners (comparable between centres/ETBs etc)

FAIRNESS- processes before, during and after assessments are equitable (learner supports are available, they are well informed of the process etc)

QUALITY - national standards and the providers' quality assurance process (ensures credibility and integrity of awards)

TRANSPARENCY- clear guidelines to ensure clarity and understanding by all relevant stakeholders

COMPLEMENTARITY- the separate and distinct roles of the provider and QQI in relation to assessment (as outlined in Qualifications Act)

20. In the module(s) you deliver, rank the assessment principles in order of **HOW STRONGLY YOU THINK THEY APPLY**. (Place most applied principle at the top and least applied principle at the bottom of the list. You can drag and drop or change the order using the arrows): \*

VALIDITY- the assessment measures the learning or skills in an appropriate way (practical skills are assessed practically etc)

RELIABILITY- the grades are reliable over time and between different learners (comparable between centres/ETBs etc)

FAIRNESS- processes before, during and after assessments are equitable (learner supports are available, they are well informed of the process etc)

QUALITY - national standards and the providers' quality assurance process (ensures credibility and integrity of awards)

TRANSPARENCY- clear guidelines to ensure clarity and understanding by all relevant stakeholders

COMPLEMENTARITY- the separate and distinct roles of the provider and QQI in relation to assessment (as outlined in Qualifications Act)

21. Please feel free to add any relevant comments about the application of the principles of assessment in your context:

#### 4. Quality Assuring Assessment

22. In your experience, has the application of quality assurance processes strengthened the principles of assessment- validity, reliability and fairness etc \*

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Other

23. For the modules you assess, have you devised your own assessment criteria and marking schemes? \*

- Yes, I have devised these myself
- Yes, I have devised these in collaboration with another assessor who delivers the same module
- No, I have used assessment criteria and marking schemes provided to me
- No, I use the marking scheme from the module descriptor

Other

24. In the last 5 years, I have compared learner assessment evidence submitted to me with evidence submitted to a different assessor (evidence for the same module) \*

- Yes
- No

Other

25. Do you think that the application of assessment quality assurance processes have enhanced the quality of your teaching practice? (Assessment quality assurance processes include planning of assessment schedules and providing evidence of feedback for example) \*

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Other

26. Do you provide feedback to learners on drafts, prior to submission of assessment pieces? \*

Yes

No

Other

27. Do you provide feedback to learners on completed assessment pieces? \*

Yes

No

Other

28. Please tick the most relevant options, as they apply to you for the following four statements:  
I am confident that:

	Strongly agree	Partially Agree	Partially Disagree	Strongly Disagree	I'm not sure what this statement means
I have a clear understanding of my QA responsibilities in the Assessment Processes	<input type="radio"/>				
Assessment QA Processes are properly implemented in my main place of work	<input type="radio"/>				
I consistently and fairly assess learner evidence	<input type="radio"/>				
My assessment strategy (briefs, submission forms, receipting of evidence, marking schemes etc) is fully compliant with quality assurance processes	<input type="radio"/>				

29. How have your experiences of Internal Verification had an impact on your role as an Assessor? \*

30. How have your experiences of External Authentication had an impact on your role as an Assessor? \*

31. If you have had a particularly positive or negative experience related to Assessment, Internal Verification or External Authentication please share it here:

32. If you have any other thoughts about the quality assurance processes that govern assessment please share them here:

## 5. Assessment and Technology

33. Do learners use technology in completing assessment pieces? (For example Microsoft Word for typing a report)

Yes

No

Other

34. Pre COVID, how did learners routinely submit their assessments? (Select all that apply)

Evidence is recorded by Assessor (video, audio, screen recordings, for example)

Teams

Hard copy/Paper/Physical Artefact Submission

Email

Moodle

Other

35. Currently, how do learners routinely submit their assessments? (Select all that apply)

- Email
- Hard copy/Paper/Physical Artefact Submission
- Evidence is recorded by Assessor (video, audio, screen recordings, for example)
- Teams
- Moodle
- 

Other

36. What mode(s) do you most often use to provide feedback on a completed assessment task?

- Handwritten feedback
- Verbal feedback- informal
- Typed feedback
- Video feedback- recorded
- Audio feedback- recorded
- A feedback meeting- formal
- 

Other

37. Which option best describes the process of compilation of learners portfolios of assessment

- It is fully compiled by the learner
- It is fully compiled by the assessor
- It is compiled by the assessor but with some input from the learner
- It is compiled by the learner but with some input from the assessor
- 

Other

38. Last year, due to COVID-19, the assessment process, including the compilation and submission of portfolios of assessment for IV and EA was very challenging. In your context, how were these activities completed. \*

39. Prior to the COVID restrictions in 2020, had you or learners ever presented content digitally as final assessment evidence?

Yes

No

Other

40. Please select the option that best describes the presentation of digital assessment evidence

The entire assessment portfolio was digitally submitted (no physical folder)

A physical portfolio was submitted with accompanying digital evidence

41. How was this evidence presented?

USB Stick

Cloud storage

Other

42. How you think that technology could further support you in your role as an assessor (and in carrying out the QA responsibilities that this role brings?)

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Information and Consent Form

**Click here to view focus group online information and consent form:**

[https://forms.office.com/Pages/ShareFormPage.aspx?id=wUnbbnK\\_6k6LP6f9CiW2jN68FMKanQIDpQKXZPh146tUNURXTk03UVZEOFdFUzdYQORTSE45RFZRWi4u&sharetoken=te8kRGFkuAnHp5fpuWmR](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ShareFormPage.aspx?id=wUnbbnK_6k6LP6f9CiW2jN68FMKanQIDpQKXZPh146tUNURXTk03UVZEOFdFUzdYQORTSE45RFZRWi4u&sharetoken=te8kRGFkuAnHp5fpuWmR)

**Static text extracted from focus group online information and consent form:**



## Focus Group Information and Consent Form

Thank you for accepting the invitation to participate in this focus group!!

Please read the below information carefully and answer the associated questions to consent to participate:

Research Study Information:

### I. RESEARCH STUDY TITLE

This study in which you are being invited to participate has the working title:

"How does the digital transformation of "Portfolios of Assessment" impact the experience of Quality Assurance processes in the Further Education Sector?".

It is being undertaken by Rachael Doherty as part of a Masters in Educational Practice in the National College of Ireland.

### II. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The study aims to advance knowledge and understanding of educators experience of Assessment Processes and the implementation of Quality Assurance processes. Ways in which a modern electronic portfolio system may support educators will also be examined.

### III. CONFIRMATION OF PARTICULAR REQUIREMENTS

Participants in this research will be asked to participate in an informal online discussion, which the researcher will request to record (video and audio). You will also be asked to participate in a short brainstorming session. The researcher will ask questions, to facilitate the discussion but will not be part of the discussions and will not express personal opinions or ideas.

The following 6 themes will be explored from the perspective of assessors:

1. Quality Assured Assessment and Portfolios - The process and how eportfolio could impact
2. Experience of IV and EA- Pros and cons, and how eportfolio could impact
3. Issues of Reliability & Transparency - Consistency and standards (internally and nationally) and how eportfolio could impact
4. Technology- Experience of the ePortfolio Template
5. Professional Peer Learning- Experience of the ePortfolio Project

### IV. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participants' involvement in this study is totally voluntary.

### V. ARRANGEMENTS TO PROTECT CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone and will not be made available to individuals who were not in attendance at the focus group. Participants' actual names will be protected and coded names will be used if direct references are required. Interview recordings and transcripts will be held by the researcher only and will be stored in a secure location and destroyed after a maximum 5 years, in line with NCIs data retention policy. .

1. Have you read the above information about this research and do you understand the information provided?

Yes

No

2. Do you agree to have your interview recorded for transcribing purposes only?

Yes

No

3. Do you consent to having your anonymised quotations included in the study report?

Yes

No

4. Please insert your name here: