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What are the key motivational factors which encourage and sustain involvement in learning activities in older people?

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Declaration

I, Jim O'Brien, hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment of the programme of study leading to the award of Master of Arts in Learning and Teaching, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: ………………………………

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Jim O'Brien

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Abstract

This study set out to seek an understanding of what motivates older adults to engage in learning activities in later life, to investigate what benefits they feel they receive from this engagement and to also understand what barriers and obstacles they face in these efforts.

The literature review provides rich sources of data and information surrounding this area and a key theme of the studies done to date is the need to engage older people themselves in any research studies being carried out on this sector. This study has been completed using a mixed methods approach combining data from survey questionnaires along with in-depth semi-structured interviews with four older learners ranging in age from early fifties to over seventy. In that way this study has installed the older learner at the core of the process in order to ensure their voices were the ones being heard throughout.

Withnall (2006) argues that what is needed is "a new insight into how people make sense of their own attitudes to learning and how they have acquired beliefs and values about what education and learning means in the context of their own lives. Such an analysis would offer a distinctive perspective on the factors that might influence older people to continue or to take up learning activity". This study has attempted to acquire that 'distinctive perspective' through the methods applied and in the analysis of the results, such that a clear answer to the research question can be achieved and possible directions for future research on this important cohort of Irish society be identified.

What emerges from this study is further confirmation of the multi-faceted nature of human motivation, particularly when attempting to measure it in terms of learning activities in older adults. Existing research has identified a number of key motivational factors at the centre of older learner's reasons for engaging in learning activities in later life. These reasons include

the need for cognitive stimulation, for social interaction and for the feelings of enhanced self-esteem and self-fulfilment (as well as improvements in physical and mental well-being) that older learners experience when engaged in learning activities in later life. All of these factors were identified in this study and will be fully addressed and discussed in chapter 5.

The study has also highlighted a number of linked areas for possible future research such as looking at prior educational experience, both good and bad, and the effects this has on motivation and participation as well as looking at some structural barriers such as ease of access to appropriate courses and the methods and availability of same.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study aims to investigate the motivational factors which contribute to the continuing involvement of many older people in learning and educational activities (both formal and non-formal) in later life.

For the purposes of this report, "older" will be defined as those over 50 years of age as this is in keeping with the Irish Longitudinal Study of Ageing (TILDA) which uses age 50 as the base age for its research. The National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) in England and Wales, also uses 50 years of age as a basis for its development work with "older" learners.

In a discussion paper titled "A Report on The Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People in Ireland" published in June 2007 by Aontas, (the national adult learning organisation) reference is made to TILDA , which was launched in 2006 and will gather data on 10,000 Irish people, aged 50 plus, over a 10 year period. In this paper they state that "this ambitious study will be vital in addressing the current dearth of information on this important cohort of Irish society". With such a "dearth of information" available it is important that continuing efforts are made to understand the needs and desires of older learners and thus this study is hoping to contribute to the body of knowledge of this "important cohort of Irish society".

The TILDA report provides us with some key statistics which are relevant to this study "it is projected that the proportion of the population aged 65 and older in Ireland will rise to 15% by 2011 and to 19% by 2031 (DOH 1999). The greatest increase will be in the oldest old, the over 80's, which is expected to rise by 66% by 2035. Ageing on this scale is an unprecedented phenomenon in Irish history". (Source: TILDA website).

Haskell (1994) wrote that a combination of medical advances allied to changing personal lifestyles was resulting in people living longer and healthier lives. Fleming, quoting Lamdin

& Fugate (1997) in his paper presented at SCUTERA in 2000, stated that by 2150 the percentage of the world's population over 65 will be 30%, up from 7% at present.

The growth in the numbers of older members of Irish society requires those in power to ensure that the needs and requirements of these members of society are met, including their educational and development needs. One of TILDA's aims is to see "how each of the key components (health, wealth, happiness) interact such that we can ensure that Ireland meets the needs and choices of its citizens in a personalized and positive environment and with due dignity and respect". This study will look at one aspect of those development needs, their involvement in learning activities in later life, and will attempt to understand the factors which motivate older people to involve themselves in those learning activities as they age.

Life Stages

Laslett (1991) spoke of the various life stages that an individual goes through in the course of their life. In later adulthood, an individual can cross a number of life stages and these have often been described in the literature as the Third Age or the Fourth Age, broadly speaking, ages 50-74 and 75 + respectively.

The Third Age has often been defined as the life period between age 50 and 74 (Jarvis 2001).

In the foreword to the book "Learning in Later Life" by Peter Jarvis, Professor Mary Alice Wolf states "In the Third Age (defined as 50 to 74 years old) one explores rituals of separation and new post-retirement opportunities. Furthermore, in the Fourth Age (after 75), there is much personal significance and creativity available" (Jarvis, Foreword ix). Sheehy (1995) actually regards 50 years old as the beginning of second adulthood.

It is on this age group that this study will concentrate, with 'older learners' defined as being 50 years of age and older without putting any upper age restriction on participants and, as will be seen in the body of the report, a number of people over 80 years of age participated in the survey questionnaire.

The Aontas study makes reference to Lifelong Learning having specific importance for older people in areas such as mental and physical health and in helping to combat ageism and negative stereotyping. It goes on to state that "involvement in formal and non-formal learning can empower older people by building their self-esteem, particularly if the learning provides opportunities from the outset for consultation and participation in shaping their educational life" (Aontas 2007, p.3).

By ensuring older people have access to learning opportunities it is believed they will be able to better participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society. These themes of involvement and inclusion, social and cultural development as well as personal development and growth are the core material for this research project. This study will attempt to understand the core motivational factors which encourage older learners to participate in learning activities in later life and the barriers and obstacles they face in that effort. It will also address the issue of personal development and growth and will explore the thesis that lifelong learning is actually a journey of personal development leading towards self-actualisation in the individual.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This study is interested in understanding the following. Why do older learners continue with their learning activities in later life? What motivates older people to want to continue learning in old age? What are the benefits they feel they achieve from their participation in learning? What are the barriers and obstacles they face in their efforts to continue with learning in later life?

The above questions have been condensed into one key research question:

"*What are the key motivational factors which encourage and sustain involvement in learning activities in older learners?*

Following analysis of the literature review, it appears that intellectual stimulation and personal development form the core reasons why older people continue with their engagement with learning activities in later life. Therefore the above research question could be framed in the form of a Null Hypothesis as follows;

"The motivation to continue involvement with learning activities in later life is primarily to satisfy intellectual and developmental needs".

The assumptions which have led to this statement being framed in this manner come from a combination of factors. These factors include a review of the literature along with the analysis of responses to the survey questionnaire and an analysis of the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews. Personal development and growth is a process which continues throughout life and has particular significance in later life as it is often accompanied by a search for meaning in one's life (Russell 2008). Jarvis (2001) contends that continuing

learning enables us to keep on growing, while Illeris (2002) speaks of our in built capacity for learning and having an intrinsic desire to fulfil that capacity. From the interviews carried out as part of this study it became apparent that a need to satisfy curiosity plays an important role in the continuing involvement of older learners in learning and educational activities. The statement above takes account of each of these factors and in a succinct manner describes the key reasons why older adults engage in learning in later life thereby setting out a clear hypothesis which can be clearly tested by this study.

This literature review will examine current research on the topic of motivation to continue with learning activities in later life. It will review aspects of adult education specifically focused on older adults, such as educational gerontology, and will also review the literature that surrounds the topic of lifelong learning. The review will also look at related areas such as the different life stages (Laslett 1991) as well as the study of motivation completed by Maslow (1954) and the importance this study placed on the need for individuals to strive for personal fulfilment or self-actualisation, particularly in relation to older learners.

The review will take a look at the work of Houle (1961) and Boshier (1991) in terms of the models they developed to understand motivation to learn in adults.

The literature review will also examine the approach and commitment of various international bodies such as the OECD, UNESCO, The Council of Europe and The European Union to Lifelong Learning, as well as the Irish Government's commitment as evidenced in its White Paper, Learning for Life (2000).

Conceptual Framework

The related fields of Education and Ageing have become known as educational gerontology and academic interest in this area only began appearing between 30 and 40 years ago (Withnall 2006).

Withnall refers to the changing nature of research in this area and the introduction of terms such as "critical geragogy" referring to transformative education for older people "as a means to operationalize the principles of critical educational gerontology" (Withnall 2006, p.30).

Withnall believes that the focus of debate should shift from policy maker and practitioner towards the actual learners and "ensure that voices of older learners themselves, hitherto largely ignored, can emerge" (Withnall 2006). This study will be a small contributor to that task as it will primarily use the contents of four semi-structured interviews carried out with four older learners to complete its findings, which will then be triangulated through comparison with the findings arising from the contents of the survey questionnaires. In both approaches it is the voices of the older learners themselves that will be allowed come to the fore and the researcher will ensure that all personal biases are bracketed and set aside.

Findsen (2007) adopts a Freirean approach whereby he suggests that "education can encourage older adults to undertake advocacy in areas such as employment, social services and health" (Findsen 2007, p.552).

Dench and Regan (2000) also make reference to the lack of data relating to older learners and state the commonly held belief that older people, who are involved in learning, benefit in terms of their own health and well-being. They also confirm that there is relatively little data to substantiate these arguments.

If the voices of older learners have been largely silent in the research to date, and data on the benefits of their involvement in learning activities is largely non-existent, then it is hoped that this study will make a positive contribution to this field of study.

During the last 30-40 years there has been growing awareness of the changing demographic patterns which are resulting in increased life expectancy. With that changing pattern, older

people would be in "special need of some kind of educational or leisure provision because the period of life after full-time work was now greatly extended" (Glendenning 2001, p.63).

Kim and Merriam (2004) also make reference to changing demographic patterns. With the population of older adults increasing they believe that the field of adult education needs to also change in response to these changing demographic patterns. Withnall (2000) makes reference to the changing emphasis which older people are placing on their needs in retirement with the emphasis shifting from issues of sickness and decline towards health, liberation and "refurbishment".

This is echoed in Duay and Bryan (2008) who believe that this demographic shift mandates a changing role for education. Their study of older learners highlights the flaws in current research on this cohort which relies heavily on quantitative studies using large sample surveys, or from cognitive research findings. Duay and Bryan (2008) believe that sample surveys cannot adequately address the nature and meaning of the individual learners experience and they advocate the use of a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews to gain a deeper insight into what learning means to individual learners.

This study will attempt to gain that "deeper insight" as well as gaining a clear understanding of what motivates older learners to participate in learning in later life. It will use a mixed methods research approach which will combine qualitative data from semi-structured interviews together with quantitative data gathered from a survey questionnaire.

Pedagogy, Andragogy, Geragogy (or Educational Gerontology) and Social Gerontology

The terms pedagogy, andragogy and geragogy refer to the practices of teaching people from different parts of the life-course spectrum, while social gerontology is concerned with the study of ageing and older people within a broader social context.

Pedagogy is usually used to describe the practice of teaching children and andragogy has been used to describe the process of teaching adults. However, as adulthood spans a number of the life stages (Laslett 1991), the term geragogy (or Educational Gerontology) has emerged to differentiate the learning and teaching of older adults. This is a relatively recent phenomenon as the term only began to appear over the last 30 to 40 years with academics such as Glendenning, Battersby, Jarvis and Withnall becoming leading commentators in this area. Educational gerontology has been described as "a field of study and practice that has recently developed at the interface of adult education and social gerontology" (Peterson 1976).

Findsen (2007) has made reference in his work to "the emerging field of older adults' education (educational gerontology) a sub-field of adult education".

His research also states that "just as the life experience differences between a 20 year old and a 50 year old can be very pronounced, so the differences between a 50 year old and an 80 year old can be similarly acknowledged" (Findsen 2007, p.551).

However, this acceptance of the differences in life experiences between the 20 year old and the 50 year old should not be used to segregate the elderly learners from the young as this practice could be termed "ghettoizing older people" (Glendenning 2001).

Withnall argues that what is needed is "a new insight into how people make sense of their own attitudes to learning and how they have acquired beliefs and values about what education and learning means in the context of their own lives. Such an analysis would offer a distinctive perspective on the factors that might influence older people to continue or to take up learning activity" (Withnall 2006, p.30).

This study hopes to make a small contribution to the analysis as proposed by Withnall above, as it is aimed at understanding the motivation to learn in older adults by engaging directly with older learners themselves in the research process.

Glendenning (2001) makes reference to the role social gerontology has played in developing the debate around the importance of lifelong learning in its fullest meaning, i.e. including older learners in the process and not just allow lifelong learning be associated with the retraining of workers and the perceived economic benefits that this might produce. He quotes Carlton and Soulsby who state that "lifelong learning is an essential tool for older people to develop and maintain healthy independent lives, as full citizens, with autonomy, self-worth and fulfilment" (Carlton and Soulsby 1999, p.80).

Glendenning believes that social gerontology has had a positive impact in the debate into older peoples involvement in lifelong learning as it has forced a revision to official social policies which before had effectively marginalised older learners (Glendenning 2001).

Notwithstanding the fact that geragogy is deemed to be a specialist area in the field of education, the principles which underlie the practice of andragogy are also applicable in the area of geragogy, these principles include;

a) The learners need to know how and why learning is important

b) Ability to take control of learning techniques

c) Prior experiences impacts learning

d) Readiness to learn

e) Adults relate better to learning in real life contexts

f) Adults have a high motivation to learn

   (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998).

Therefore, in accepting the use of the term geragogy to describe the teaching and learning of older adults, one also accepts that the principles of andragogy are also fully applicable to the process.

Understanding the Research Question

Relatively little research has been done which focuses specifically on older learners and their particular needs and motivations in terms of their involvement in learning activities in later life (Dench and Regan 2000, Withnall 2006).

The emergence of Lifelong Learning as a specific focus for government policy makers, both at a national and international level, brings a greater level of interest and debate to the subject of educational gerontology (Withnall 2006).

Withnall suggests that older people will increasingly become a target group for educational policy makers as changing demographic trends indicate that more people will be living longer and will be looking to fill the post-retirement years with activities that are fulfilling and personally rewarding.

More and more studies are being carried out on the impact of these demographic changes from both the educational provider perspective and the older learner's perspective. This study is interested in investigating one aspect of this area of education, understanding the motivational drivers that play a part in encouraging participation in active learning opportunities by older learners. In attempting to understand what motivates older people to continue with their active involvement with learning in later life it may become possible to extend the study into the practitioner arena, offering the opportunity to suggest appropriate responses from policy makers, practitioners and service providers. Studies of this type were

advocated by Glendenning who suggested that "what was needed was a conceptual model for the reasons for participation in different types of learning activities in the post-work period of life, then we might be able to move towards a refinement of theory in lifelong learning which is inclusive of learning in later life. This is a long way further ahead than the simplistic mantra of 20 years ago that '*lifelong learning means what it says*'" (Glendenning 2001, p.69).

These objectives are worthy and suitable reasons for studies such as this to be completed. However, as this is a small scale project its findings will not be generalisable to the wider older learner population, but nonetheless due to the methods being employed it is hoped that the findings will provide sufficient 'rich and thick' data and that this will provide further impetus for a larger scale study to be carried out on this important sector of our society.

Older Learners

In this study, older learner will be defined as those over 50 years of age, a cohort of people sometimes referred to as the 'Baby Boom' generation or as being in the 'Third Age' (Laslett 1991).

Baby Boomers

The United States census bureau considers a baby boomer to be someone born during the demographic birth boom between 1946 and 1964. That age group would now constitute people in the 48 to 66 age category. However, it is not the intention of this study to exclude those over 66 years of age, therefore another, broader definition of older learner might be more beneficial.

The Third Age

The Third Age has often been defined as the life period between age 50 and 74 (Jarvis 2001).

It has been described as a period of life offering opportunity for personal fulfilment and self-realisation, indeed the "crown of life" (Laslett 1991). Laslett has written of the four distinct stages of life in his book *A fresh map of life (*1989) where he outlines how the first stage is one of socialisation and being dependent on others, usually parents, this is followed by the second age in which one enters adulthood and autonomy. The third age is described as a period when one is free from the constraints of the second age and allows one greater freedom and opportunities for personal creativity but which is followed by the fourth age where one prepares for death and may once again become dependent on others.

Jarvis (2001) states that in the Third Age one explores rituals of separation and new post-retirement opportunities. The themes of self-fulfilment and self-realisation arising from post-retirement opportunities occur again and again throughout the literature and will be a key focus of this study.

Beyond the Third Age

The term 'Third Age' is restrictive in that it seeks to set an upper age barrier on participants, and again that is unnecessary in order to complete the study in question. By limiting the study to those only in the 'Third Age' a discriminatory perspective would immediately be introduced which might undermine the value of those in the 'Fourth Age', those who are often viewed negatively as being in a period of decline and dependency and are not seen as having the potential to learn anything new or to share existing interests (Soulsby 2000).

For the purpose of this research it is thought best to define 'older learners' as anyone above 50 years of age, generally a time when people may have an opportunity to partake in learning for self-fulfilment and self-actualisation. The results of the survey findings also provide support for the thesis that the fourth age is not a period of dependence and decline only but that those in this stage of life need to have their learning needs and requirements met just as

much as any other cohort. This is echoed throughout the literature on this sector which continually states that older learners are not a homogenous body and should not be treated as such. It is also borne out by the responses received in the survey questionnaires where very interesting and valuable contributions have been made by those in the 81+ age category.

Lifelong Learning

Much research and discussion has taken place on the subject matter of lifelong learning and there are many different interpretations of what exactly the term means. "Education in general, and lifelong learning specifically, is the locus of many conflicting ideologies" (Marks 2007). The term crosses a number of different areas in the field of education and can be equally valid in its various applications, for example, it can be as easily applied to the retraining of workers within employment as it can to the involvement of retirees in continuing with formal and informal learning.

Lifelong Learning as a concept is sometimes viewed as a recent phenomenon first espoused by Faure in the 1972 report "Learning to be" (UNESCO 1972). The Faure report spoke of "learning opportunities for everybody, independent of class, race or financial means, and independent of the age of the learner" (Scheutze 2006).Others would see lifelong learning as a much older concept probably around since the time of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers (Withnall 2000).

The term lifelong learning has evolved from an earlier conception of continuing education with its traditional focus on continuing vocational education. According to Jarvis, the term 'lifelong education' was first used in Yeaxlee in 1929. Jarvis goes on to explain how the concept took some time to fully be accepted and it wasn't until the 1970s that the boundary between school education and adult education began to be breached and the idea of adult

education became consumed within continuing education, (Jarvis 2001). He also mentions the problem whereby there continued a sub-division between continuing education and continuing professional education with continuing professional education dominating. However it does appear that during the 1990s with the advances in information technologies and the growth in distance education that lifelong education was 'rediscovered'.

In recent times some key terms have come into common parlance, such as 'Knowledge Economy' or 'Knowledge Society'. This need to ensure economies remain competitive in 'knowledge' terms has resulted in a general acceptance of the need to ensure workers remain active learners throughout their working lives (Uggla 2008). However this should not become the dominant factor in lifelong learning by policy makers, as in doing so older learners get marginalised with little attention paid to their particular needs and requirements.

In helping to fully understand the term lifelong learning, for the purposes of this study, the following definition by Thomas is deemed most suitable,

 "All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective" (Thomas, 2003, p. 4).

This definition uses two key words, 'activity' and 'aim'. These words provide a differentiation between learning that is purposeful and directed and that which happens passively in an unplanned manner. This view is supported by Smith & Spurling who state that "lifelong learning is intended and planned learning", and while they accept that lifelong learning happens throughout the lifespan, they maintain that aimless and unplanned learning cannot be lifelong learning, terming it as 'trivial' (Smith & Spurling 1999, p. 9).

Other writers on the subject would not agree with this narrow approach to defining lifelong learning but see it in a broader perspective. Billett (2010) sees learning as something that humans do continuously and across our lives, taking the view that lifelong learning occurs all the time as we engage in activities and interactions in every walk of life and even when we are alone. Roberson and Merriam (2005) wrote of the importance of Self-Directed Learning as an often overlooked aspect of older adults continuing personal development and on-going involvement in lifelong learning and they make reference in their paper to Brockett's (1985, 1987) research which indicated a positive relationship between involvement in Self-Directed Learning and general life satisfaction in older adults.

However, this study will take the Smith & Spurling philosophical standpoint in approaching the research question, as any other interpretation of lifelong learning cannot allow an analysis of the motivational factors at play. If there is no point of differentiation between older learners who actively pursue purposeful learning opportunities and those who do not, with both learners defined as lifelong learners, how can there be any analysis of their differing motivational characteristics?

The difficulty with adopting this approach lies in accepting an overly institutionalised, official version of lifelong learning, as a gift which is provided by the practitioner and in doing so, marginalising many from participating (Billett 2010).

Overall the literature on the subject of lifelong learning can be confusing with the potential for misinterpretation particularly when the focus becomes overly concentrated on the vocational aspects as against the more general lifelong and life-wide approach. This study will pay particular attention to these key issues when completing the research.

Societal issues

The Irish Government's White Paper on Adult Education-"Learning for Life" (2000), makes the following statement under the heading 'Older People'

 "Strategies for active ageing stress the critical importance of access to learning as a key tool in coping with change, and the importance of physical, social and mental activity to general well-being. In that respect, adult education can play an important role in contributing to active ageing, promoting social integration, reducing health costs, enhancing the quality of life, and providing training in new technology for many whose mobility and access to information and communication might otherwise be restricted"(White Paper on Adult Education-Learning for Life, p.167).

It can clearly be seen from this statement that supporting the principle of lifelong learning is in fact an official policy of the Irish Government and this is also the standpoint taken by many other national governments. However, it can be seen from this statement that the overlapping use of terminology has the potential to cause confusion, in that the term 'adult education' appears to be interchangeable with the term 'lifelong learning'.

The social importance placed on lifelong learning also extends to various other international bodies including the OECD, UNESCO, The Council of Europe and The European Union (Scheutze 2006).

The National Report on Lifelong Learning in Ireland (2010) refers to lifelong learning in terms of its role as a "potential agent for social integration within Europe". By linking lifelong learning to social integration in Europe, the authors of the above report clearly set out to establish the importance of lifelong learning in European society. The report refers to

six areas of priority, one of those six areas is "Cultural Development" (the role of adult education in enriching the cultural fabric of society) and the second is "Community Development" (the role of adult education in the development of community with a collective sense of purpose).

The Educational Disadvantage Centre at St. Patrick's College, Dublin, published a report in 2010 titled "National Report on Lifelong Learning in Ireland". In the introduction section of this report they refer to the Irish Government's White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life (2000), in which they state "the White Paper marks the adoption of lifelong learning as the 'governing principle' of education policy in the Republic of Ireland" (Maunsell, Downes & McLoughlin, 2000).

This report makes numerous references to lifelong learning as being concerned with issues beyond just those of an economic nature, "rather than being merely a tag on to the economic rationale for lifelong learning, the White paper prioritises the issue of social cohesion through its emphasis on active citizenship through personal, community and cultural development" (Maunsell et al, 2000, p.1). This conceptualisation of lifelong learning as being fundamentally concerned with broader citizenship issues and not just about economic factors is heartening and helps frame this study in terms of focusing on the motivational drivers at the heart of learning activities amongst older learners. The reference to "personal, community and cultural development" suggests that lifelong learning is an important aspect of personal development and self-fulfilment, a step towards achieving personal fulfilment or self-actualisation as described in Maslow's study on the human hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954). This aspect will be looked at in more detail in a later section. However, it does appear that much of the research on lifelong learning tends to focus on it primarily from a vocational perspective.

The vocational education focus of lifelong learning policies in UK policy is evidenced from many UK Government educational policy documents (Abukari 2005). This is also evident when viewing the relative weighting given to analysis of the economic benefits (as against the social, cultural and personal benefits) of advocating lifelong learning policies as observed in the Irish Government's paper "National Report on Lifelong Learning in Ireland" (2008).

It appears from the research that few countries include older people in their national policies for lifelong learning (Withnall 2000, Jarvis 2001).

 "Lifelong learning continues to be viewed narrowly, as training for work and training in work, directed primarily at young and middle-aged people" (NIACE 2000).

This aspect of official emphasis on the economic benefits of promoting a policy of lifelong learning continues to dominate the research and ultimately damages the opportunities of older learners to participate in real lifelong learning practices.

The marginalisation of older learners and the prevailing ethos of a vocational emphasis to most official lifelong learning policies and agendas is a position that should be reversed and challenged by older learners themselves. Findsen (2007) advocates a Freirean approach to lifelong learning whereby older adults should engage in an active, creative struggle to assert their rights to formal education opportunities. He quotes Bytheway (1995) when he advocates "collective social action to fight against a prevailing ideaology that presents older adults as passive bystanders, dependent recipients of the public purse and non-contributors to civil society" (Bytheway 1995).Withnall (2000) is of a similar view when she writes that older people are still largely marginalised in educational policy circles in Europe by continued emphasis on economic competitiveness and how official attitudes to later life tends to conceptualise it as a social problem.

Other motivational factors

The area of motivation, particularly with reference to continuing with learning in later life, is multi-dimensional and cannot be defined by one or even a few simple factors.

Houle's work "The Inquiring Mind" (1961) provided the impetus for researchers to conduct adult learning motivation studies. He interviewed adult learners to understand why they pursue learning. As a result of the interviews, Houle identified three subgroups of adult learners:

1) the goal-orientated,

2) the activity orientated,

3) the learning-orientated.

"Houle's work paved the way for further research on adult participation in learning" (Kim & Merriam 2004).Following Houle's work, other researchers began developing models to analyse and measure the learning orientations of adults. These researchers included Sheffield, Boshier, Morstain and Smart and others. Boshier was a leading expert in this area and had developed a model for such analysis. In 1991, he updated his earlier model the EPS (F-Form) with a new version EPS (A-Form) which was examined by Fujita-Starck (1996) and which was found to have improved levels of factor and construct reliability. The original Educational Participation Scale (EPS) consisted of 14 factors and 48 items and this instrument has been widely used by researchers in this field. The updated version contained 7 factors each consisting of six items for a total of 42 items.

The final seven factors include:

1) Communication improvement

2) Social contact

3) Educational preparedness

4) Professional advancement

5) Family togetherness

6) Social stimulation and

7) Cognitive interest.

There are several models which are accepted as capable of accounting for adult motivation for learning. These models primarily provide quantitative data and research in this area is extensive and continuing, "while quantitative data collected from these studies does improve our understanding of the motivational drivers compelling older adults to participate in lifelong learning there is an emerging body of qualitative research that helps to fill in some of the gaps in our understanding of the experience of elder learning" (Lamb & Brady 2005, p.211).

"Qualitative studies involving in-depth interviews offer a strategy for gaining a deeper insight into what learning means to the individual learner and what he or she considers helpful and hindering in learning situations" (Duay & Bryan 2008, p.1071).

Studies of older adults themselves suggest a number of motivational factors including cognitive interest, social activity, and expressive and instrumental orientations (Kim & Merriam 2004).

" . . participation [of active older adults] is related to prior educational experiences, confidence in relationships with others, propensity to engage in self-directed learning activities, awareness of the availability of educational programs, and interest in topics for future learning" (Fisher, 1983, p. 7).

Recent research confirms the above findings (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997; Manheimer & Moskow McKenzie, 1995; Martin, 2003). These studies indicate that prior educational achievement is a key indicator of likely participation in learning activities throughout life even into old age.

"The motives of older adults for learning are complicated and multi-dimensional. Rarely does a single motive lead older adults to participate in educational activities. Generally both external and internal forces influence the decision of older adults to pursue learning". (Kim & Merriam 2004, p.445).

In a research paper completed by Sally Dench and Jo Regan titled "Learning in later life: motivation and impact", their findings confirmed that 80% of learners (of a study of 336 learners over the age of 50) enjoyed a "positive impact of learning on at least one of the following areas, their enjoyment of life, their self-confidence, how they felt about themselves, satisfaction with other areas of life and their ability to cope". They go further in their report to state the following, "the most important reasons for learning were intellectual, for example, wanting to keep their brain active" (Dench & Regan 2000).

Hebestreit in her article on the role of the University of The Third Age (U3A) in meeting the needs of adult learners, outlines the benefits for older adults in continuing with learning later in life, such as "mental and physical improvement, increased confidence and self-esteem, and increased social contacts and relationships" (Hebestreit 2008)

With the growing levels of research now becoming available from both quantitative and qualitative methods a clearer understanding of the multiple motivational drivers has emerged "several studies suggest that the strongest motivations among older students are cognitive interest (intellectual curiosity) and a desire to learn. Studies of older adults themselves

suggest a number of motivational factors including cognitive interest, social activity, and expressive and instrumental orientations" (Kim & Merriam 2004, p.453).

Lamb & Brady (2005) also refer to a study carried out in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) which is attached to the University of Southern Maine (USA). Forty five members of the OLLI were interviewed in a focus group approach and the findings confirmed that there were four major categories of benefits identified being "intellectual stimulation; participation in a supportive community; opportunities for enhancing self-esteem; and opportunities for spiritual renewal" (Lamb & Brady 2005)

It is apparent from the research that involvement in learning activities in later life is clearly of benefit to older learners, with Lamb & Brady (2005) even making reference to the "life-enhancing impact of educational experiences on older adults", and this helps frame the importance of completing research on understanding older learners needs in this area.

When looking at the factors that act as barriers to participation in learning Dench and Regan (2000) report that the most common reasons for not learning were a lack of time and a lack of interest, while 22% of their participants felt they were too old.

Other barriers to participation in continuing learning in the third age and beyond include health and mobility issues, transport arrangements, financial restrictions, fear of technology along with painful earlier experiences with education. Jarvis (2001) has suggested that for learning to become fun it needs to be "separated from education" because for many people there are unhappy memories associated with their early educational experiences. This theme became apparent during the interviews and will be commented on in more detail later in this report.

Jarvis makes reference to the "tremendous growth in third age education- but most of it for leisure time since not all older adults want to pursue education for qualifications" (Jarvis 2001, p. 8). He sees the liberal adult education curriculum of the previous generation now becoming the menu for third age learning. He asks "How will third age education develop when those people who have worked in the knowledge occupations all their lives retire?" (Jarvis 2001, p.8).

While this study is focused on older adults, and aims to understand the motivational factors that encourage their participation in lifelong learning, it will be interesting to observe if there is any evidence of a changing dynamic in terms of older learners becoming more important to policy makers and to government, "looking for signs that the more radical perspectives in adult education are emerging" (Jarvis 2001)

Fulfilment and personal development in later life

While the broader conceptualisation of lifelong learning as espoused by Billett (2010) is not without its merits it does not begin to address the issue of why some older people are driven to continue purposeful and active learning activities and others do not, "why, for some, education in later life has proved to be an essential on-going experience" (Glendenning 2001).

This, "essential on-going experience", as described by Glendenning is a key element of this study. What drives some individuals to maintain an active involvement in learning throughout their lives?
What do older learners gain through their continuing involvement in learning activities?

This theme of "being on a journey of continuing personal growth" through the third age of life and beyond is found throughout the literature with Fleming (2005) referring to the "searching for an understanding of who we are, with new agendas for personal growth and development emerging in older age".

An ever present element to the discourse about learning in later life is the term "self-actualisation". Most students of motivation will be aware of the work of Abraham Maslow. He refers to basic human needs being organised into a hierarchy of pre-potency, i.e. when certain physiological needs have been met, such as the need for food and shelter, humans then seek to satisfy "higher" needs which emerge, the pinnacle of such "higher" needs being the desire to achieve self-actualisation (Maslow 1954).Self-actualisation has been described by Maslow as follows "What a man can be-he must be. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow 1954).

Maslow's hierarchy model has five levels, starting from the personal needs at the bottom and progressing to the intellectual needs at the top. The levels are categorised under the following headings: Physiological, Safety, Social, Esteem and Self-Actualisation.

While not without its critics, some of whom have argued that it is over simplistic and lacks empirical evidence (Jarvis 1985), Maslow's theory does provide a very interesting link with the literature surrounding motivation in older learners.

Moody (1976) believes that the search for self-actualisation is a defining characteristic of older age and that contemplation and meditation in older age are vital activities on the way towards achieving that state.

The literature consistently makes reference to self-esteem and self-actualisation in attempting to understand the motivation of older learners in continuing their involvement with learning in later life (Russell 2008, Findsen 2007, Merriam & Cafferella 1999, amongst many others).

Findsen (2007) refers to the effort to encourage older people into active engagement with learning where, "the pattern of self-actualisation is emphasised, where spiritual growth is highly valued". He also quotes McCluskey's 1974 study on education and ageing and highlighted the four key areas important to older adults;

1) Coping needs; adults engaged in physical fitness, economic self-sufficiency, basic education

2) Expressive needs; adults participating in activities for their own sake and not necessarily to achieve a goal

3) Contributive needs; adults deciding how to be useful contributors to society

4) Influence needs; adults becoming agents for social change

Findsen believes that it is the coping and expressive needs that take priority in an older person's life. This belief is in line with the majority of research on this cohort in that expressive needs are dominant over other motivational factors. Russell (2008) makes reference to this powerful motivational driver when she finds from her research "a link between learning in later life and the ontological and existential search for meaning". Russell has also referred to findings in her study where older adults found more enjoyment in life as they experienced more enjoyment in learning. She makes reference to the theory that one can only achieve self-actualisation in later life and this fact, allied to the realisation that the number of years left in life is limited, becomes a key motivational factor in older people's "need to learn" (Russell 2008).

In acknowledging the need to learn amongst older adults Russell is echoing the views of Illeris who also refers to the older adult turning towards educational processes for libidinal reasons "Learning is basically libidinal, i.e. that man is biologically equipped with a capacity for learning and a desire to realise this capacity," (Illeris 2002, p.203).

"Mature adults – from the life turn to old age- increasingly turn towards educational processes of libidinal cultural and social activities of their own choosing, that may contribute to richness and harmony in their lives", (Illeris 2002, p.226).

Jarvis (2006) also states that there is a human imperative to learn and that learning is imperative to human growth.

Because of this constant reference to self-actualisation and fulfilment in the individual, being achieved through active engagement with learning opportunities it is of vital social and democratic importance that accessible lifelong learning opportunities are available for all citizens. If a society is organised around the principle that individuals contribute more effectively to society when they are active members of that society, then ensuring access to lifelong learning opportunities (and encouraging participation in these opportunities) should be a government priority.

Conclusion and summary

The literature review looked at research on the topic of motivation and lifelong learning from a number of angles including the societal issues, the study of older learners themselves (known as Educational Gerontology), the life stages theories and at the area of personal development and fulfilment, including reviewing Maslow's study of the hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1954). It appears from the research that the key motivational driver for continuing learning in later life is intellectual curiosity.

Allied to that curiosity factor there appears to be a desire in the older learner to continue to seek personal development through active learning, with personal fulfilment and self-actualisation being the ultimate outcome. However there are other factors which also impact on the individual decision to continue with learning in later life, such as the need to retrain for career/work reasons, or the desire to learn something for practical reasons i.e. technology such as the internet to help support a need to stay in contact with friends or family who may be living abroad etc. While accepting that no one factor can account for motivation to continue learning in later life the research does suggest that the "human imperative to learn" (Jarvis 2006) is the fundamental driver behind on-going involvement by many older people in continuing learning in later life. This imperative is libidinal (Illeris 2002) and unavoidable for many older learners and is fundamentally bound up with a desire to seek fulfilment and self-actualisation (Maslow 1954).

This study is intent on understanding what the key motivational factors are which encourage older adults to engage with and sustain an interest in active learning in later life.

Chapter 3 – Method

Introduction

There are primarily three main research methods used in research practice;

> ➢ Qualitative

> ➢ Quantitative

> ➢ Mixed Methods

A brief description of each method is outlined below. This study has been completed using the mixed methods approach and this chapter will outline the rationale for using this method and will also provide justification for its suitability in this case.

Research Methods

The three major research methods can be summarised as follows;

Quantitative-

This is research dealing with numeric data and measurement, and which seeks to explain, predict, and generalise. It uses whole populations or representative samples and focuses on testing hypotheses. Quantitative research adopts a scientific objective approach.

Qualitative-

This method of research deals with words, pictures, artefacts and complex rich data. It focuses on meaning, understanding, interpretation and contextual accounts. It uses purposive, representative samples and is exploratory rather than hypothesis based, accepting the subjectivity of the researcher.

Mixed Methods-

This method essentially combines both quantitative and qualitative methods in the hope of gaining a deeper insight into the research topic by using the best elements of both methods,

A mixed methods approach can 'triangulate' findings (Denzin 1970/1978) that is, to back up a set of findings from one method of data collection underpinned by one methodology, with another very different method underpinned by another methodology. For example, a questionnaire (normally quantitative) is sent to gather statistical data about responses, and then this is backed up in more depth by interviewing selected members of the questionnaire sample (normally qualitative).

The Research Question

This study is focused on older adults, (those over 50 years of age), who continue to participate in learning activities in later life. The aim of the research is to identify the key motivating factors which encourage this particular cohort of learners to continue with this

engagement in learning and to analyse and discuss the findings. The research question evolved from the above objective is;

"What are the key motivational forces which encourage and sustain involvement in learning activities in older learners?"

This study will attempt to confirm or deny the hypothesis that the motivation to continue with learning activities in later life is primarily driven by the desire to satisfy intellectual and personal development needs. It will do so through the application of a mixed methods research project involving older learners themselves.

Methodology and Methods

Methodology refers to the philosophical framework or paradigm which guides the research.

Methods refer to the ways that data is collected.

The Research Paradigms (or Philosophical Worldviews)

Mertens (2010) has described a paradigm (or philosophical worldview) as representing a way of looking at the world, and includes the philosophical assumptions that guide the way we think and act. These assumptions then largely determine which research methods are adopted for use in the field of scientific and social research. Chalmers (1982) describes a paradigm as "made up of the general theoretical assumptions and laws, and techniques for their application that the members of a particular scientific community adopt". Therefore, a

paradigm is a belief system, a world view or framework that guides research or practice in a field.

There are four major world-views or paradigms and they are widely discussed in the literature, often under the following four headings; Positivism/Post-positivism, Constructivism, Advocacy/Participatory and Pragmatism. Cresswell (2009) describes these worldviews as being a way of looking at the world and at the nature of research itself and states that they are often shaped by the discipline area of the student, the beliefs of advisers and faculty in a student's area, and by past research experience.

Cresswell (2009) describes positivism and post-positivism as a method which takes the approach that knowledge can only be based on scientific observation and experiment while constructivism takes an alternative position in that it holds the view that reality is socially constructed and that the researcher's objective is to make sense of the meanings others have about the world. He further explains that in the advocacy/participatory worldview the focus is on ways of empowering and emancipating specific groups, particularly those groups who are marginalised or oppressed.

Finally, he explains that pragmatism does not accept that there is only one scientific method to gain knowledge or truth about the world and this approach to research design adopts a mixed method approach, drawing on the methods used by each of the other paradigms.

Methodology to be used: The Pragmatic Paradigm

"Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality. This applies to mixed methods research in that inquirers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage in their research" (Creswell 2009, p.10).

This study has been guided by the Pragmatic Paradigm and has adopted a mixed methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, which will be described in detail later in this chapter. Pragmatism is primarily focused on the research question and allows different methods be used to answer the question, a "what works" approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

There has been significant growth in the use of mixed methods in social research and its acceptance as a valid and reliable way of completing research is now becoming broadly accepted. In a paper written by Creswell and Garrett (2008) they state that mixed methods research has "come into its own in the last 20 years". They trace its beginnings to the 1980s and draw particular attention to a number of books which were published in that period by writers from different parts of the world from which a conceptualisation of the mixed methods approach to research as it is known today, was borne. The first book to look at the combining of the two traditional research methods was written in 1988 by John Brewer and Albert Hunter and it was called *Multimethod Research: A Synthesis of Styles.* So, while still a relatively recent addition to the field of social research and having been particularly embraced by researchers in the education sector, a number of other sectors have begun to embrace mixed methods research, such as counselling psychology, physics education and leadership, (Plano Clark 2005).

Chosen Method- Mixed Methods

This study was completed using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. A survey questionnaire was prepared and a purposeful sample of suitable target groups was identified and the questionnaire distributed to them. Following the return of the questionnaires an analysis of the answers given by the participants was undertaken and a set of guiding questions was prepared to be used in the next stage of the process, which was to conduct four semi-structured interviews. The analysis of the survey questionnaire was done using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The four individuals who consented to participate in the interviews are all over 50 years of age (two being in the 50-60 age category and two in the 70-80 category). Three of the interviewees had completed and returned the survey questionnaire while one had helped in its pilot-testing. Each of the interviews was audio taped with the consent of the participants and the interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim. A copy was given to each of the interviewees who reviewed the contents and signed and returned confirmation letters agreeing with the veracity of the transcriptions.

The audio tapes were transcribed in full and have been retained for inspection but will be erased by the 30/09/2012.A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted of the transcripts and the findings were correlated with the findings from the survey questionnaire. The thematic analysis was guided by the work of Tesch (1990) as described by Creswell (2009) as follows;

- "Get a sense of the whole. Read all the transcripts carefully. Perhaps jot down some ideas as they come to mind.

- Pick one document (i.e. one interview) – the most interesting one, the shortest, the one on top of the pile. Go through it, asking yourself "What is this about?" Do not

think about the substance of the information but its underlying meaning. Write thoughts in the margin.

- When you have completed this task for several participants, make a list of all topics. Cluster together similar topics. Form these topics into columns, perhaps arrayed as major topics, unique topics and leftovers.

- Now take this list and go back to your data. Abbreviate the topics as codes and write the codes next to the appropriate segments of the text. Try this preliminary organising scheme to see if new categories and codes emerge.

- Find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories. Look for ways of reducing your total list of categories by grouping topics that relate to each other. Perhaps draw lines between your categories to show interrelationships.

- Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.

- Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform preliminary analysis.

- If necessary, recode your existing data" (Creswell 2009, p.186).

The above steps provided the guiding frame work for this part of the study. The raw material was obtained from the transcripts using this framework and with which the detailed analysis of the research question (along with the analysis of the data acquired from the survey questionnaire) could be concluded and from which the conclusions to the research question was reached. A similar approach is outlined by the work of Attride-Stirling (2001), whose six-stage process below also provided similar guidance in this case.

Table 3.1 Attride-Stirling six-stage process

Step 1: Code text
Set up coding framework; break up text into segments
Step 2: Identify themes
Abstract themes from coded text; refine themes
Step 3: Construct thematic network
Identify Basic, Organising, Global Themes; illustrate with Thematic Network diagram; refine themes
Step 4: Describe & explore thematic networks
Identify text segments to support analysis
Step 5: Summarise thematic networks
Summarise themes & patterns
Step 6: Interpret the patterns
Bring together summaries and relevant theory to explore themes, concepts, patterns, structures in text. Relate findings to original research questions.

Following completion of the analysis of both the survey questionnaires and the interview transcripts the results were written up and a discussion of the findings was completed with the conclusions providing indications for possible future research directions on this topic.

Rationale and Justification

A key strength of qualitative research is its focus on the contexts and meaning of human lives and experiences for the purpose of inductive or theory-development driven research. This study will primarily benefit from the qualitative element of the mixed methods being employed, as the in-depth interviews will allow for a thorough investigation of the question at hand. The survey questionnaires allow for the addition of quantitative analysis to further enhance the research and add a layer of validity to the findings in a form of "triangulation" of those findings.

The term "triangulation" was popularised in Denzin's (1970/78) works and was, it appears, drawn from the concept of triangulation in surveying. The basic premise is that a researcher conducts parallel studies using different methods to achieve the same purpose with a view to providing corroborating evidence for the conclusions drawn, i.e. as a technique of validation (Bazeley 2002).

Creswell (2008) has observed that "When researchers bring together both quantitative and qualitative research, the strengths of both approaches are combined, leading, it can be assumed, to a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone".

Other studies in this area have successfully employed a mixed methods approach as was observed in the 2007 AONTAS report called "Don't Stop Me Now! A report on the Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People in Ireland". They commenced with desk-based research followed by an online survey. This was supplemented by an Open Ended Questionnaire which was followed by engaging with Focus Groups and completing Group Interviews. This report provides excellent material on this important topic and the methods employed were justified by the outcome

In Withnall's study "Exploring Influences on later life learning" (2006), a focus group discussion method was used, which is a qualitative method not dissimilar to this study. Purdie and Boulton-Lewis (2003) completed their study "The Learning Needs of Older Adults" by interviewing 17 adults between the ages of 70 and 82 and Duay and Bryan (2008) completed a study called "Learning in later life: what seniors want in a learning experience" by employing a qualitative design in that they interviewed a purposeful sample of 36 participants (26 females and 10 males) from age 65 to 88 years old.

The qualitative approach is of primary importance in this type of research in that to attempt to understand the meaning of an individual's experiences a methodology that provides "rich and thick data" is necessary and interviewing participants is an appropriate means to achieve that end (Fok 2010).

On the basis of the above factors this study has combined a qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews) with a quantitative approach (survey questionnaires) and has used the data received from each to ensure that the final results provide a deeper understanding of the research problem in this case.

The Steps Involved

a) Two initial interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders in this sector

1) Age Action Ireland (AAI) - AAI is a charity which promotes positive ageing and better policies and services for older people.

2) Aontas - The National Adult Learning Organisation.

The interviews were held with Margaret Fitzpatrick, (Education Officer of Age Action Ireland) and with Niamh O'Reilly, (Membership Development Officer of Aontas). The purpose of the interviews was to help develop deeper knowledge of the sector and to gather as much information as possible about the factors that impact on older people in Ireland in 2012. From these interviews a preliminary survey questionnaire was prepared and advice and guidance on its distribution was received from both interviewees

b) The initial two interviews were followed by the preparation and pilot testing of the survey questionnaire to be distributed to the target cohort

c) The questionnaire was distributed using a "snowball sampling" strategy (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2000)

d) Following the return of the completed survey questionnaires, both quantitative and qualitative analysis of their contents took place

e) Questions to be used in guiding the proposed semi-structured interviews were prepared following analysis of the returned questionnaires as well as from insights gained from the initial interviews referred to at a) above

f) Agreement was reached with four potential interviewees, from contacts made during the initial fact finding process and during the questionnaire distribution process

g) These individuals all volunteered to participate in the semi-structured interviews and these interviews were subsequently conducted with them

h) The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and a qualitative thematic analysis of their content was completed

i) The results from the survey and the semi-structured interviews were analysed and written up and the study completed.

The Initial Interviews

The two initial interviews provided valuable, insightful and helpful guidance on the development of the study being undertaken.

In the initial interviews advice was offered on the most effective way to ensure the return of the survey questionnaires. It was advised that they should be distributed by hard copy as the target cohort might not have access to computers or may not be proficient in their use and this could have led to a low response rate. This advice was accepted along with a recommendation that some of the questions on the survey should be open ended with dialogue boxes available as this would allow the participants an opportunity to give fuller responses potentially resulting in a deeper and richer study overall. Both of these interviewees also offered assistance in distributing the questionnaires and offered referrals to other relevant stakeholders and interested parties.

The recommendations offered by both AAI and Aontas were adopted and the study set a target return of between 40 and 50 responses. This return target was achieved with 45 completed questionnaires received back from the distribution sent.

Snowball Sampling

A form of "snowball sampling" provided additional relevant resources to be approached and was achieved as follows;

Following the first meeting with Age Action Ireland, introductions were made to a number of U3A groups throughout the country. This resulted in the distribution and return of survey

questionnaires from a variety of these U3As, including the branches in Sutton/Baldoyle, Ballymun, Blackrock, Tallaght and Waterford.

Age Action Ireland also recommended that Aontas be approached, as they have a specific interest in the educational needs of older people. This led to the meeting with Niamh O'Reilly and following this meeting a further reference was given by Aontas to contact Active Retirement Ireland which led to the wider distribution of the survey questionnaires.

Additionally, following a discussion with a class colleague, the survey questionnaire was distributed amongst the older teachers and some older students in a college of further education and finally, following a discussion with a private teacher in Co Clare, the questionnaire was distributed to an active retirement group involved in a private art and history class there. This "snowball sampling" ensured that a representative sample of older learners across a broad geographic sphere was achieved thus helping to ensure that the results were not biased by being overly concentrated with any one group or in any one particular area.

Table 3.2

The Distribution Group

Name	Activity
Age Action Ireland	Charity, advocating on behalf of the elderly
Sutton/Baldoyle	U3A group
Ballymun	U3A group
Blackrock	U3A group
Tallaght	U3A group
Waterford	U3A group
AONTAS	Charity, advocating on behalf of the elderly
College of Further Education	Third level college in Dublin
Co Clare private school	Private classes in art and history for older students.

The Survey Questionnaire

The questions used in the survey questionnaire went through a pilot testing process whereby they were initially tested with a group of mature third level part-time students. They were also tested with an independent teacher who specialises in providing private teaching to older adults (those in the 50+ age group) and finally they were further developed following a review by the supervisor to this study.

Key amendments implemented along the way included;

1) Not to ask for respondents age but to group the age categories, i.e. 50-60 etc

2) To provide a list of educational achievements to choose from and not just ask the respondents to describe their prior educational achievements

3) To use clearer definitions in structuring the questions to avoid ambiguity i.e. 'Why do you participate in continuing learning', was changed to a two question approach whereby the respondents were asked to choose, from a list of options, the importance they placed on each available option in terms of their reasons for continuing in learning /educational activities followed by a separate question asking if there were any other reasons they continued to participate in learning activities.

4) Not to provide the option 'Prefer not to answer'. This was removed from the questionnaire following the first pilot testing as it was deemed unnecessary

5) To provide a clearer rating scale. This was amended to include the key prompt words above the numbers in the scale at each end of the scale i.e. where 1 indicated 'Not very important' this information was placed above that number in the final survey questionnaire while number 5 had the words 'Very Important' placed above it.

6) To provide a ranking system for question asking participants to rank the factors provided from 1 to 6 (1 = most important).The original questionnaire requested the learner to tick the relevant boxes that applied to them.

7) To provide a ranking structure to question 16 following the initial pilot of the questionnaire

8) To revise question 15 with the options laid out in a horizontal format as against their original presentation which was in a vertical format as this was felt to be more suitable for the question asked.

The final piloting of the questionnaire took place with the study supervisor and the following additional improvements were added,

9) Realign some of the questions to better suit the flow of the questionnaire

10) Add FETAC, as an option, to question 3

11) Improvements to the text of question 6

12) Removed a typo from question 9

13) Added 'Instructor' to the text of question 10

14) Improvement to the text of question 11

15) Add a separate question after 12 allowing 'Other' to become a separate question

16) Improvements to the text in question 15

17) Removed the option 'other' in question 15 as it is a ranking question

18) Removed a typo from question 18

Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, and 18, had dialogue boxes attached to them in order to allow respondents provide more detail in their answers if they wished to do so.

The structure of the questionnaire thus allowed both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of the content to be completed. The results were manually inserted into an Excel programme and relevant statistical data was generated, along with charts and diagrams giving a visual representation of the findings, these diagrams greatly aiding interpretation of the results (see Chapter 4).

The open-ended questions with dialogue boxes resulted in some detailed responses from a number of the respondents which allowed for more in-depth qualitative analysis to be completed. The thematic analysis of these more detailed responses also helped guide the content of the questions used for the semi-structured interviews which followed.

The study had set out to achieve a target return of between 40 and 50 completed questionnaires. Due to time constraints the survey was closed on the 15/03/2012 at which

point there were 45 usable questionnaires returned. Six separate questionnaires were received but were unusable and a further 3 usable questionnaires were received after the 15/03/2012 and have not been included in the analysis.

The distribution of the questionnaires was achieved with the support of the following bodies in a form of "purposive sampling";

> Age Action Ireland (through a number of the University of the Third Age groups)

> Aontas – (the National Adult Learning Organisation)

> Active Retirement Ireland, (national network of more than 500 local Active Retirement Associations)

> A College of Further Education (to a number of the teachers and older learners)

> Members of a private school in Co Clare providing Adult Art and History classes

The questionnaires were given to certain individuals within each of these groups who co-ordinated their completion and return by other members of these organisations over a period of approximately 4 weeks.

The questionnaires were anonymous and required no identifying personal data to be input on them. They consisted of a total of 20 questions, mixing open ended questions with closed ended questions along with a number of Likert Scale questions.

These type of questions help gauge attitudes and opinions to certain topics not always captured in either open or closed question types.

The Questions in the Survey Questionnaire

Part A, questions 1-5 are demographic questions:

Question 1: *Age Categories*

The information gathered from this question provided useful information in terms of observing any discernible differences in the attitudes and needs of older learners across different stages of the life cycle, i.e. would there be observable differences between those in the 71-80 age category compared with those in the 50-60 age category?

Question 2: Gender

This question was asked to identify the levels of responses between the sexes and to look for any themes in the answers which could be accounted for by gender.

Question 3: Marital Status

This question was included in the survey to help provide more depth to the analysis in that its inclusion provides the opportunity to be aware of any particular pattern of participation in lifelong learning amongst any particular segment of the population

Question 4: Employment Status

This question sought to find quantitative data on the current employment status of the participants in order to hypothesise on the impact of employment on continuing in learning activities in later life.

Question 5: Employment type

The purpose of this question was to determine if any pattern of participation was observable from any specific employment type i.e. would most of the participants have come from any particular employment sector.

Part B, questions 6-20 are the key survey questions:-

Question 6: Please tick which of the following educational achievements you have attained;

1	Junior Certificate
2	Leaving Certificate
3	Diploma
4	Ordinary Level Degree
5	Honours Degree
6	Post Graduate Qualification
8	Other

(Eight options were available to respondents, with the eight being 'other').

A dialogue box was attached to this question allowing for further details to be input if the participants wished to do so. This question was included in order to help build an in-depth picture of the participants in this study and ultimately help bring conclusions to the research question.

Question 7: Have you participated in any adult educational activities in the past? Y/N answer

This question sought to know if respondents had previously participated in adult educational activities in order to draw conclusions on the likely impact of prior engagement in learning activities with continuing involvement in learning activities. The question also included dialogue boxes allowing respondents to elaborate on the types of prior adult educational activities they might have partaken in and also allowed them to provide details on possible reasons they might not have done so. This question is useful in terms of continuing to build the picture of the participants and the influences on their motivational drivers and possible barriers to involvement thus helping to reach conclusions in terms of the research question.

Question 8: Are you currently participating in any adult educational activities? Y/N answer

This question is a continuation of the theme begun with question 7 whereby the respondents are able to provide data and information in the attaching dialogue box, if they so wished, around the types of adult educational activities they are currently participating in. This continues the objective of developing "rich and thick" data as espoused by Fok (2010).

Question 9: Please indicate on a scale of 1-5 how important it is for you to remain involved in learning activities: (with 1 indicating 'not very important' and 5 indicating 'very important').
This question used a rating scale to determine the degree of importance the respondents placed on their continuing involvement in learning activities. The scale allows for

quantitative analysis of the results and provides useful insight into the attitudes of the respondents to this important aspect of the research question.

Question 10: Please indicate which of the following learning settings you prefer:

1	Formal classroom
2	Small Informal groups
3	Virtual Classroom
4	Private tutor
5	Other

(Five options were provided including 'other' which was followed by a dialogue box which would allow for more detailed responses should the participants wish to do so).

This question was also included to continue the objective of building the 'rich and thick' data mentioned earlier. The responses here provided insight into the preferred learning environments of the participants and thus helped with the on-going understanding of the research cohort and thus ultimately the research question itself.

Question 11: Please indicate which of the following you prefer;

a) Learning with my own age group,

b) Learning with mixed age groups,

c) No preference, I like both methods.

This question sought to understand more about the target cohort and to again continue to build a deeper level of knowledge of their preferences and dislikes in terms of lifelong learning. These questions provide opportunities to gain insights that straightforward Yes and No questions cannot do.

Question 12: Choosing from the list below, please rank these factors in terms of their importance in relation to your reasons for continuing in learning/educational activities, (1=most important, etc).

1	Intellectual stimulation
2	Develop new skills
3	Personal enjoyment and fulfilment
4	Gain a qualification for work
5	Gain a qualification for other reason
6	Social reasons

(There were 6 options provided to the respondents).

The aim of this question is to seek to determine what the key motivational factors at play in encouraging participation in learning/educational activities by older people are. The results of this question provide some of the key findings in the study. This question was also linked to question 13 which followed it.

Question 13: Are there other reasons you continue to participate in learning activities? Y/N answer

(A dialogue box was attached allowing for more in depth responses to be included should the participants wish to do so).

Question 12 and 13 are two of the most important questions in the survey questionnaire (as well as Qs 16 &17), in terms of addressing the research question. The answers provided here by the participants allied to the thematic analysis conducted on the interview transcripts provide the key material for the results and conclusions section of the study.

Question 14: Please tick which of the issues listed below (if any) may have caused a barrier to your continuing or participating in educational activities? (You may tick more than one item).

1	Difficulty with mobility
2	Difficulty with transportation
3	Not enough free time
4	Difficulties with technology
5	Costs
6	Feeling too old
7	Feeling incapable of dealing with the material
8	Other

(Eight options were provided with the eight being 'other', a dialogue box was attached allowing for more detailed answers to be given if the participants wished to do so).

The aim of this question is to understand the factors that prevent people from participating in lifelong learning and to understand the de-motivating aspects of these factors on older people. This information is important in terms of continuing to build data with which to address the research problem.

Question 15: 'Participating in educational activities is good for me'

1	Strongly Agree
2	Agree
3	No Opinion/Don't know
4	Disagree
5	Strongly disagree

This question is structured as a scale, in this case a Likert Scale, where the attitudes of the participants are assessed based on a range of possible answers as detailed above. The results help determine the strength of feeling respondents display towards a particular statement and provide valuable data to researchers.

Question 16: From the list below, please rank the benefits you feel you get (if any) from involvement in learning/educational activities, (1=most important, 5 =least important)

1	Enhanced self-esteem
2	Feel more independent
3	Feel more socially included
4	Feel capable of achieving other objectives
5	Physical health is improved

(There were five options available here)

This is another key question and along with questions 12, 13 and 17, provides the most important material in terms of addressing the research question. As stated at 13 above, the results from questions 12, 13 and 16 allied to the qualitative analysis of the interviews allows for the core research question to be addressed. The other questions provide the additional knowledge and relevant data to help build an in-depth picture of this cohort of learners but the core material is provided by the answers given in these specific questions and from the material gathered from the semi-structured interviews which followed.

Question 17: Are there other benefits you feel you get from involvement in learning/educational activities? Y/N answer;
(a dialogue box is included here to allow for more detailed answers to be given by the participants if they wished to do so).

Combined with questions 12, 13 and 16 this question produced some very interesting results which helped provide the core material for the study.

Question 18: There are plenty of adult educational activities available for older learners:

1	Strongly Agree
2	Agree
3	Don't know/no opinion
4	Disagree
5	Strongly Disagree

This Likert Scale question was included to gauge attitudes amongst the respondents about support services and opportunities for older people who wish to participate in learning activities in later life. This question was important in terms of building rich data about this learner cohort.

Question 19: What learning/education opportunities would you like to see available for older learners?

1	Easier access to College/University
2	More local adult education courses
3	Greater local government support for older learners
4	Other

(There were four options available to choose from here including 'other'. A dialogue box allowed for more detailed answers to be input by respondents if they wished to do so).

This question continued the aim of building rich and thick data with the aim of fully addressing the research question and finding a relevant conclusion to the research question in the process.

Question 20: Are there any other observations or recommendations on this topic you would like to make? Y/N answer

(A dialogue box allowed respondents to provide more detailed answers to this question if they wished to do so).

The aim of this question was to allow the participants in this survey add any additional material they felt was relevant to the research question and thus for the study to potentially unearth important data or information which might not have been captured otherwise.

The Semi Structured Interviews

Following the initial analysis of the returned survey questionnaires a group of questions were prepared for use in the semi-structured interviews. These guiding questions were to provide a framework with which to develop the study further (through the one-to-one interview process) but they were not meant to be restrictive or limiting in any way. The interviews had to be allowed to develop in their own ways and any relevant themes or narratives that were emerging in these interviews were pursued where it was deemed appropriate to do so.

The prepared questions therefore provided a degree of structure to the interviews but did not limit the directions that the interviews ultimately took. This approach allowed for more flexibility in the interview process, interesting avenues were followed as they emerged and it

also allowed a degree of rapport to be established with the interviewees which might not have been possible with a rigidly structured interview.

The interviewees were volunteers and were given a consent form to review and sign before their participation in the interview itself. The interviewees agreed to the audio recording of the interviews and a transcript of the interview was given to them subsequently which they agreed accurately reflected the content of the interview. They also signed and returned a copy of the transcript document. These transcripts, as well as the recorded interviews will be destroyed on the 30/09/2012 and the interviewees are happy with that arrangement. No individual identity will be exposed through the interview process with each interviewee identified by the following coding system;

Table 3.3

The first interviewee is known as;	**Interviewee No. 1**
The second interviewee is known as;	**Interviewee No. 2**
The third interviewee is known as;	**Interviewee No. 3**
The fourth interviewee is known as;	**Interviewee No. 4**

The results of the interviews were thematically analysed and the results were correlated with findings from the survey questionnaires.

The difficulty that arises with recorded interviews is the possibility for interviewer bias whereby the interviewer is consciously or unconsciously leading the interviewee. This factor has been noted in the transcripts and an analysis of the interviews indicates that the interviewees expressed opinions and thoughts on the subject matter that were entirely their own without obvious direction from the interviewer. Another possible danger is that the

recording of the interviews might have inhibited the interviewees and their responses to interview questions might have been less open because of the presence of the recording equipment. From an analysis of the transcripts it appears that these interviewees answered honestly and openly all questions asked of them and volunteered additional information and insights not specifically requested of them. Therefore, it appears that these potentially problematic issues have not proven to be a difficulty in this case.

The benefits of recording the interviews included the fact that the transcripts provide an accurate record of what was said thus allowing for in depth analysis of the material to take place. The recording also allowed for more eye contact and observation of body language and signals that indicated when a portion of material might be sensitive and thus avoided etc.

Validity and Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure or a concept while *Validity* is concerned with the integrity of the results.

While the number of interviewees and returned survey questionnaires was small and cannot be deemed to be representative of the general population of older learners in Ireland nevertheless the nature of the purposive sample chosen and the structure of the study itself (in combining a detailed questionnaire with in-depth interviews of four older learners themselves) should provide a reasonably accurate measurement of the participants motivations for engaging in learning activities in later life.

The four semi-structured interviews were transcribed and copies sent to the interviewees who each returned a signed copy confirming that the transcripts accurately reflected the interview

which they had participated in. This helps ensure the validity of the results in this study. The interviewees also represented a cross-section of older learners in that two of the interviewees are in the 50-60 age category while two are in the 70 to 80 age category. One male and one female from each age category was interviewed and the researcher was aware in advance of conducting the interviews, through preliminary interaction with each of the interviewees, that each of them brought varied experiences and histories to the topic and this added what Ponterotto and Grieger (2007) called "sufficient information rich cases" which are necessary to help ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research.

Morse et al (2002) have approached the issue of validity and reliability in qualitative research through the use of "verification strategies" and have proposed that five specific strategies be followed. This study has attempted to implement these five strategies throughout the research process:

- **Methodological coherence**: there must be congruence between the research question and the methods used. This study sought to understand the motivational factors behind older people's involvement in learning activities in later life. The use of a survey questionnaire allied to follow up semi-structured interviews was deemed to be a suitable method to answer the research question in this case as the statistical data generated from the questionnaire was used to develop the questions which guided the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews allowed a detailed picture to be built up about this topic and thus aided the generation of the results allowing for the research question to be addressed appropriately.
- **Sample:** The sample selected in this case was deemed representative of the 'older learner' population as a whole and thus the findings can be relied upon to answer the research question adequately.

- **Data should be collected and analysed concurrently:** As the data was being collected a process of continuous analysis, refinement of guiding questions for the interviews and an awareness of the various emerging themes was implemented and the resultant discussion section reflected the evolving conclusion to the study.

- **Thinking Theoretically:** Every effort was made to adopt an approach which accepted that the theories were to inform the questions which provided the answers from which the theories were adjusted where necessary.

- **Theory development**: In accepting that theory is developed as a result of the research process this study would hope to have made a contribution to this important topic which might lead to further more detailed studies being completed and thereby aiding further development of theory in this area.

Triangulation

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, triangulation of the results was achieved through the use of both quantitative methods (survey questionnaire) and qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews). As can be seen in the results section (Chapter 4), this triangulation was achieved as the data analysis achieved from key questions asked in the questionnaire was corroborated by the findings which emanated from the interviews. These findings are analysed in detail in Chapter 5.

Summary of Methodology

Overall, it can be seen that the results of this study can be relied upon as representing the valid results of a mixed methods research approach whose primary focus was on the contents of the four semi-structured interviews. While most of the questions in the survey generated statistical data, a number of them also allowed for qualitative analysis and this analysis, allied to the qualitative analysis carried out following the interviews, provided the core results which were used to address the research question in this case.

Research Ethics

Research ethics require of researchers that the rights and dignity of the participants in any research study are respected and protected, particularly with regard to issues of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. In addressing these issues, this study paid particular attention to the principles of respect, beneficence and justice for the participants, both in terms of those who completed the survey questionnaire and those who volunteered to be interviewed.

The distribution of the survey questionnaire was done through a number of third parties, such as Age Action Ireland / U3As, Aontas and two teachers. This method of distribution removed any direct contact between the researcher and the respondents and thus removed any potential for influence or pressure being exerted over the respondents by the researcher. This ensured that the respondents voluntarily participated in this survey. In addition, a cover letter was attached to the survey questionnaire outlining the objectives of the survey and confirming to the participants that no identifying personal data would be collected from them by the questionnaire. The covering letter also allowed the participants to opt out of answering any question(s) they were not comfortable with answering thus respecting their privacy and

ensuring that any distress or anxiety which might be experienced by some participants, (relating to possible sensitivities around certain subject matter), was avoided.

An Informed Consent form was also presented to the interview volunteers in advance of their interviews. This form again outlined the nature of the proposed study being undertaken and assured them that their anonymity would be protected. The form also sought their consent for the interviews to be audio recorded. If they did not agree with the recording of the interview they were free to ask for same and that interview notes would be taken instead. None of the interviewees took this option with all four agreeing that the interviews could be audio recorded. In addition the interviewees were assured that the recording of the interview would be erased when the College advises that they are no longer needed to be retained. This is expected to happen by latest date 30/09/2012.

Transcripts of the interviews were also sent to the interviewees and they each signed a copy of the transcript and confirmed that it accurately reflected the content of the interviews. Every effort was made by the researcher to ensure that personal biases were bracketed throughout the interview process and that the analysis of the transcripts was done accurately and fairly and reflected the actual responses and feelings of the participants.

Therefore it can be seen that the key ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity were properly addressed in the data collection methods utilised and other issues relating to respect for the participants and ensuring no harm was done in the research process were also properly addressed throughout the process.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the major research approaches and has provided a justification and a rationale for the adoption of a mixed methods approach for this study. The chapter then

went on to outline the steps which were implemented to complete this study providing sufficient detail to allow for a similar study to be completed in the future if required.

Each of the questions used in the survey questionnaire was described and the logic for its inclusion in the survey explained. A detailed description of the process of preparing for the semi structured interviews then followed along with details of the method of conducting these interviews and the informed consent forms that were gathered from the participants.

The chapter then dealt with the issues of Validity and Reliability and finally addressed the important issue of Research Ethics and how those were dealt with in concluding this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction;

The results of the returned questionnaires will be dealt with in this chapter. There were 45 returned survey questionnaires providing the data which has been set out in tables and graph form within this chapter. The analysis and interpretation of the data will be completed in chapter 5, along with detailed analysis of the four semi-structured interviews. This chapter **_only_** sets out to present the data and does not extend to any detailed commentary, analysis or interpretation of same.

Survey Questions

The exact questions used in the survey questionnaire will preface each of the tables, graphs and figures in this chapter. A brief description of the results will then be given for each of the questions, followed by a table setting out the results for that question and a figure giving a graphical representation of those results.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Four semi-structured interviews were completed. Three of the participants completed the survey questionnaire while one was part of the pilot testing of the questionnaire but did not subsequently complete it. A detailed analysis of the interviews will follow in chapter 5.

Question 1- Please indicate which age category you belong to.

The first question asked of participants was a straightforward demographic question asking respondents in which age category they belong. The majority of respondents are in the 61-70 age group, with 21 people in this category. The next largest category was the 50-60 age group with 13 people here, while there are 8 people in the 71-80 age group and only 3 of the participants are in the 81+ category.

Table 4.1

Age Categories		Count
56-60		13
61-70		21
71-80		8
81 +		3
Total		45

Figure 4.1
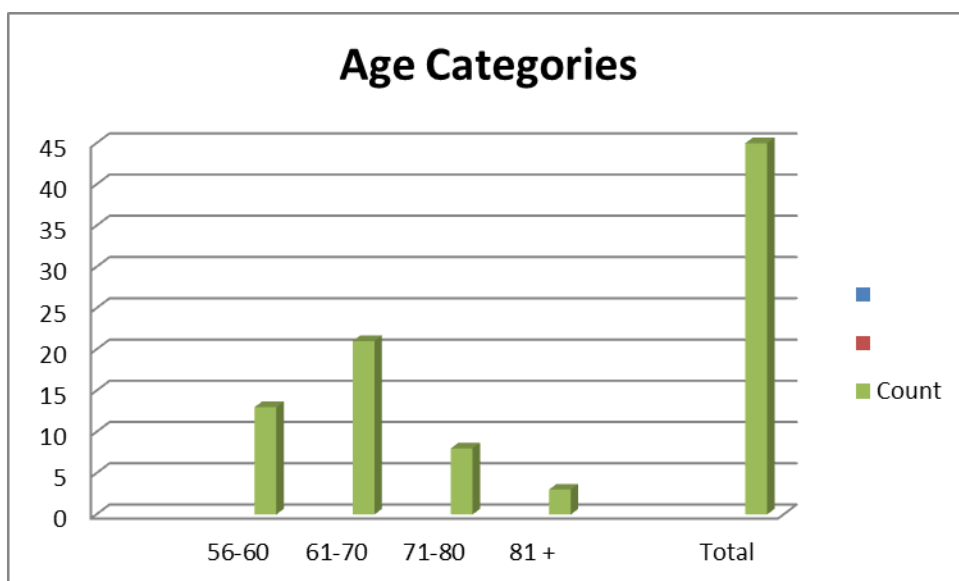
Question 2 – Gender

Question 2 continued the demographic theme and looked to see the mix between male and female participants. In line with most other studies on participation rates amongst older learners, the result of this question also confirmed a substantial difference between male and female participants. Of the 45 people who responded, 71% are female and 29% are male.

Table 4.2

Gender	Count
Male	13
Female	32
Total	**45**

Figure 4.2
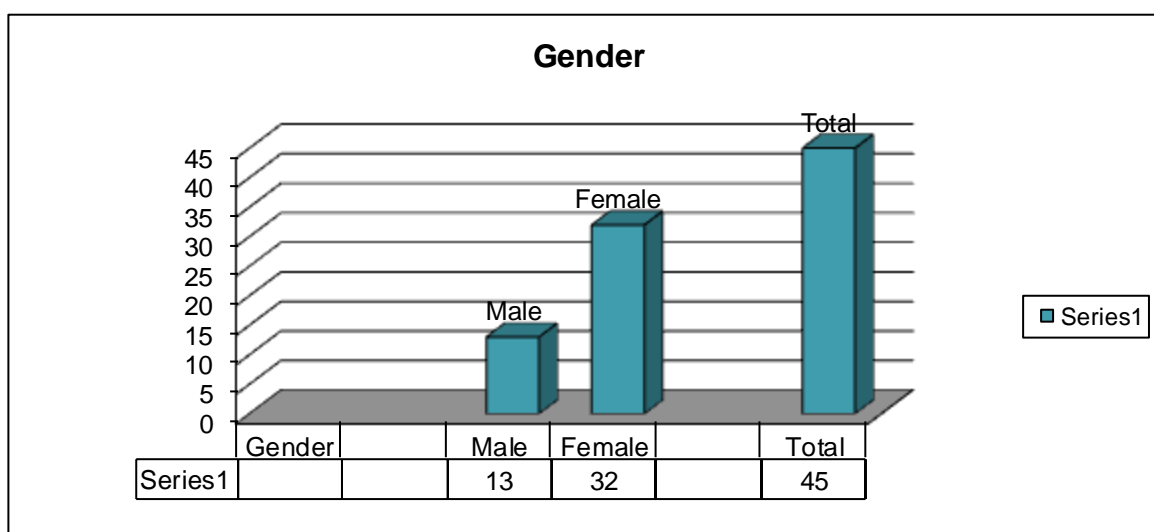
Question 3 – Marital Status

Question 3 asked participants to confirm which of the five different options provided best described their marital status. The results show that the majority (30 people or 66% of the respondents) are married with the next highest category being those who are widowed (7 people or 16%).

Table 4.3

Options	Status	Count	%
1	Married	30	66%
2	Widowed	7	16%
3	Divorced/Separated	4	9%
4	Single	4	9%
5	Other	0	0%
Total		**45**	**100%**

Figure 4.3
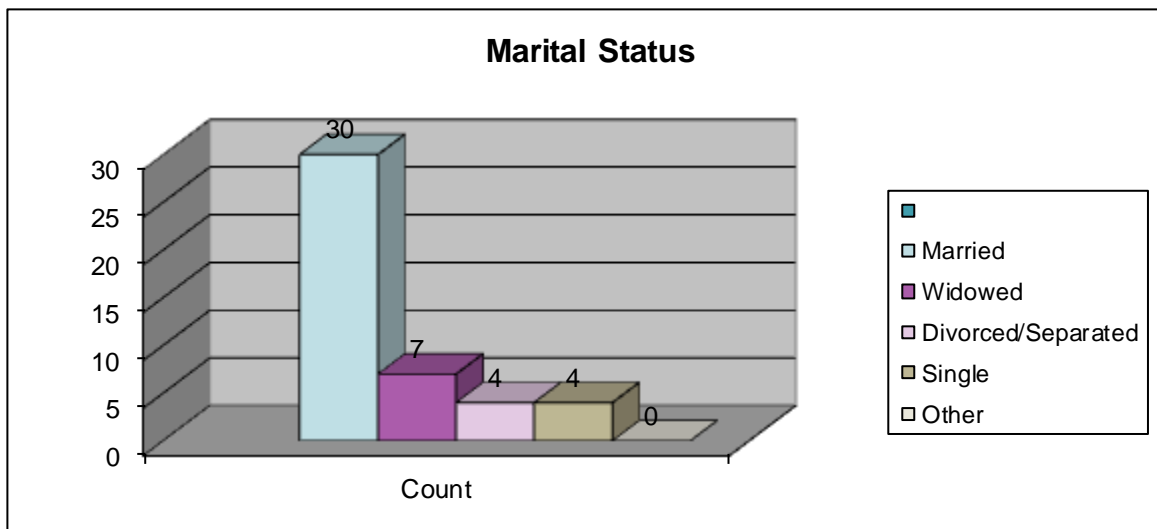
Question 4 – Employment Status

This question sought to explore the employment status of the participants and the results were not surprising with 53% of the respondents being retired. However, excluding the 'other' and 'not currently employed' categories, there are 16 people still involved in employment being 36% of the respondents.

Table 4.4

| Options	Employment Status	Count	%
1	Retired	24	53%
2	Self-employed: Full Time	2	4%
3	Self-employed: Part time	3	7%
4	Full time employee	8	18%
5	Part time employee	3	7%
6	Not currently employed	4	9%
7	Other	1	2%
Total		**45**	**100%**

Figure 4.4
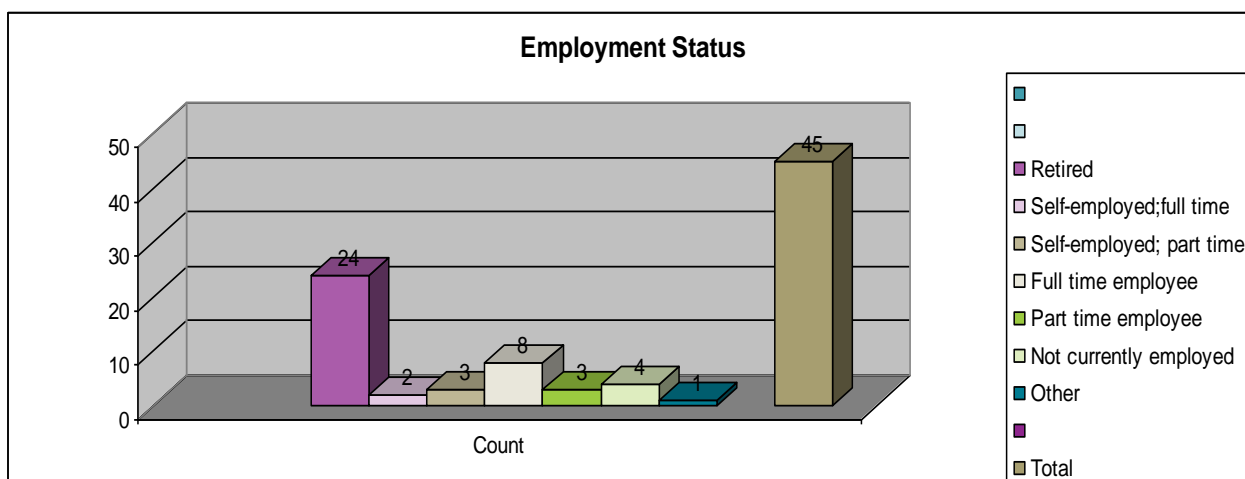
Question 5 – Type of Employment (if retired or not presently working please indicate previous employment type, those who may never have been in formal employment please answer at e) below).

Question 5 further explored the employment question and asked respondents to identify which area of employment they are or were involved in. A majority of the respondents, 20 out of 45, opted for the 'Professional' choice, with the next highest category being 'Clerical' with 13 of the respondents opting for this choice.

Table 4.5

Type of Employment	Count
Unskilled manual labour	1
Skilled manual labour	3
Clerical	13
Professional	20
None applicable	2
Other	6
Total	**45**

Figure 4.5
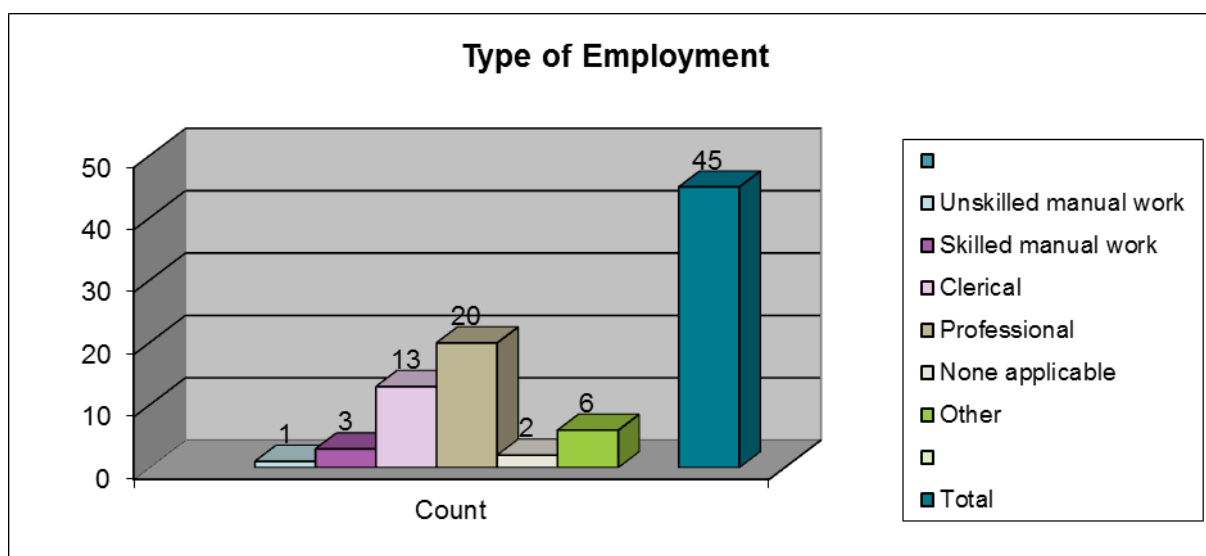
Question 6 – Please tick which of the following educational achievements you have attained.

Question 6 required participants to indicate what level of formal education they had achieved and in this case the majority had left formal education after their Junior Certificate (13 respondents). The next highest category had achieved a Diploma following their Leaving Certificate (10 respondents) while a similar number (8) had achieved a Post Graduate Qualification.

Table 4.6

Educational Achievements	Count
Junior Certificate	13
Leaving Certificate	6
Diploma	10
Ordinary Level Degree	5
Honours Degree	1
Post Graduate Qualification	8
Other	2
Total	**45**

Figure 4.6

Educational Achievements

Count

Legend:
- Junior Certificate
- Leaving Certificate
- Diploma
- Ordinary Level Degree
- Honours Degree
- Post Graduate Qualification
- Other
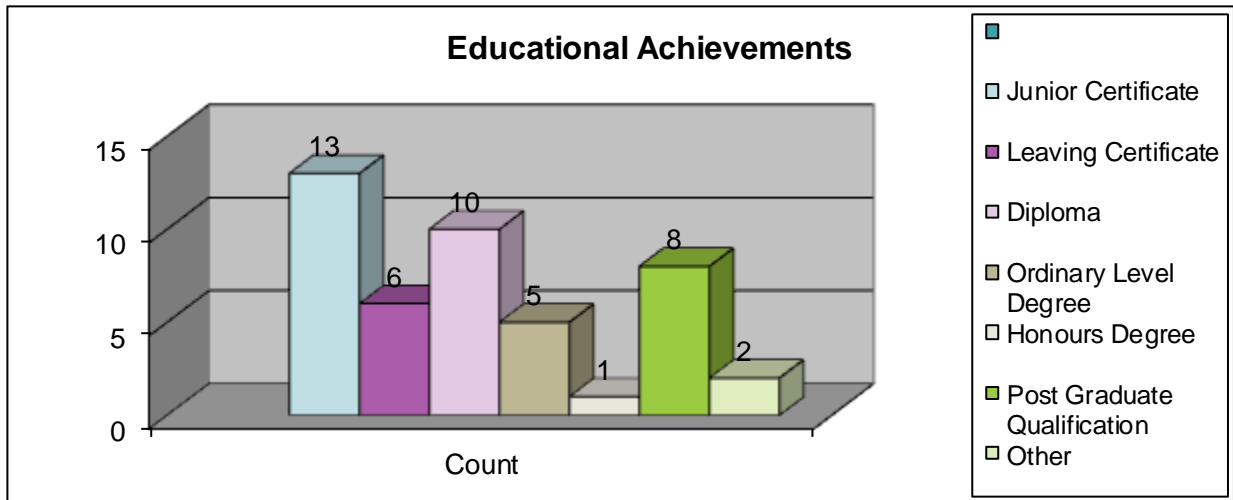
Question 7 – Prior Participation in Adult Education activities

The overwhelming majority of respondents had participated in Adult Education activities in the past with 89% of the participants confirming same and only 11% stating that they had not done so.

Table 4.7

Options	Prior Participation in Educational Activities	Count	%
1	Yes	40	89%
2	No	5	11%
Total		**45**	**100%**

Figure 4.7

Prior participation in Adult Education

		Yes	No		Total
Series1		40	5		45

Prior Participation in Adult Education
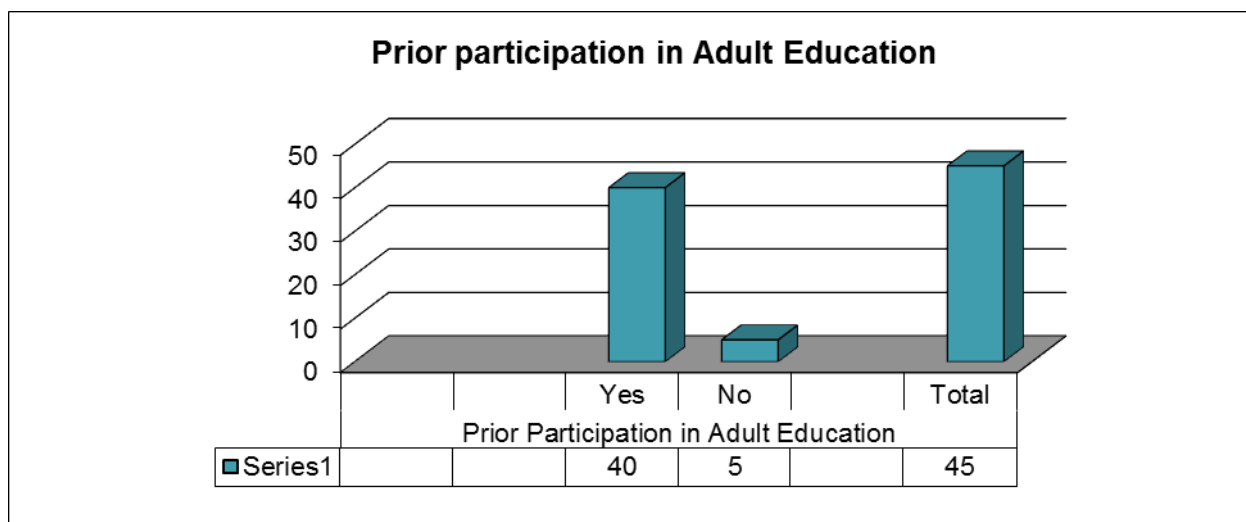
This question also provided an opportunity for respondents who had not participated in prior educational activities to provide further details on the reasons that had contributed to them not participating in adult educational activities. Of the five respondents who had indicated that they had not previously participated in adult educational activities, all five had cited "not having the time" with 3 stating that "child minding" was the main obstacle and 1 also indicating that "running a business" had been the cause of not having participated in continuing educational activities**.**

Question 8 - Are you currently participating in any adult educational activities?

This question asked participants if they are currently involved in adult education activities and the response showed that 58% are not currently participating, being 26 out of the 45 respondents. However it does show a significant number are currently involved in adult education activities.

Table 4.8

Are you currently participating in adult educational activities?	Count
Yes	19
No	26
Total	**45**

**Figure 4.8**

Current Participation in Adult Education
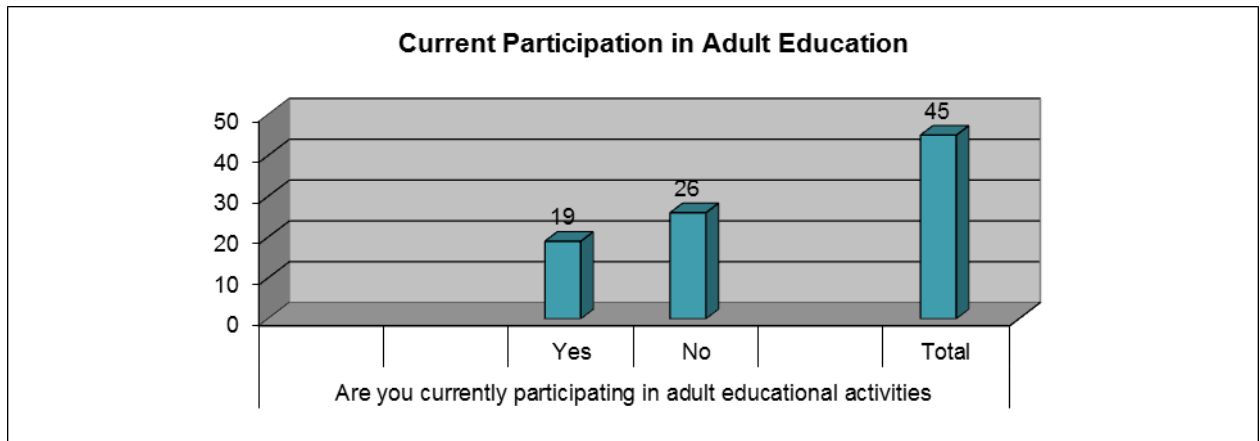
Question 9 – Indicate on a scale of 1-5 how important it is for you to remain involved in learning activities: (with 1 indicating 'not very important' to 5 indicating 'very important').

We can see from the table and the graph below that remaining involved in learning activities in later life is clearly very important for the majority of the respondents with 25 of the 45 participants in the survey ticking box 5 (indicating they regarded it as being 'very important' to stay involved). A further 12 ticked box 4 which also indicates a significant level of importance being attached to learning in later life amongst these respondents.

Table 4.9

Option Range		Count
1	Not Very Important	1
2		2
3		5
4		12
5	Very Important	25
Total		**45**

Figure 4.9
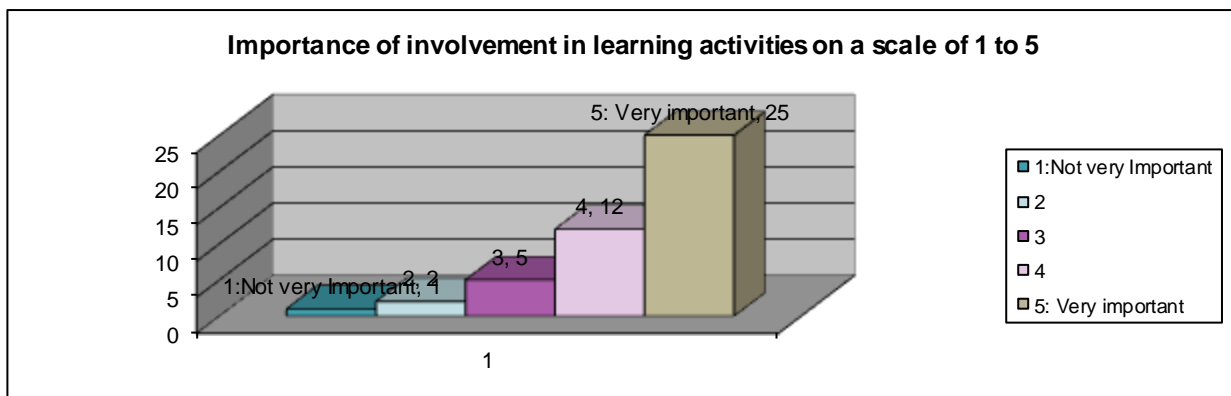
Question 10 – Please indicate which of the following learning settings you prefer

This question sought to understand if there are any particular learning settings which appeal to older learners and it can be clearly seen from the results that the majority prefer to learn in small informal groups (30 out of the 45 respondents). Thereafter the results are split amongst the other options fairly evenly, except for the 'formal classroom' option where 8 respondents indicated a preference.

Table 4.10

Preferred Learning Settings	Count
Formal Classroom	8
Small informal groups	30
Virtual Classrooms	2
Private Tutor	1
Other	4
Total	**45**

Figure 4.10
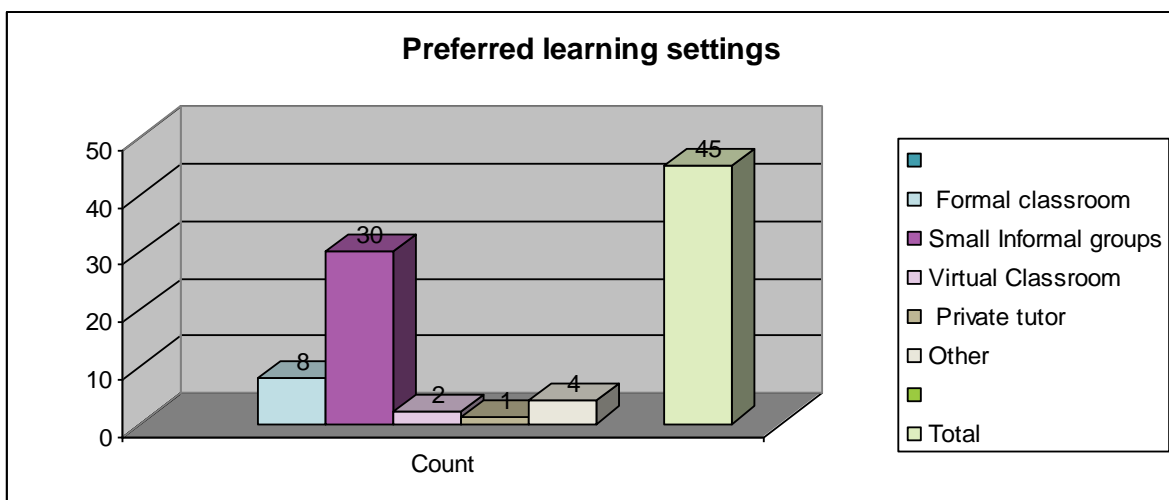
Question 11 – Please indicate which of the following you prefer

Of the three options available in Question 11, the results obtained paint an interesting picture in terms of who older learners like to learn with. It appears from these results that the majority of learners are ambivalent to the age groups of their fellow learners. Of those who do express a preference most indicate that they like to learn with mixed age groups. Only 7 respondents prefer to learn with their own age group.

Table 4.11

Preferred Learning Colleagues	Count
Own Age Group	7
Mixed Age Group	18
Either	20
Total	**45**

Figure 4.11
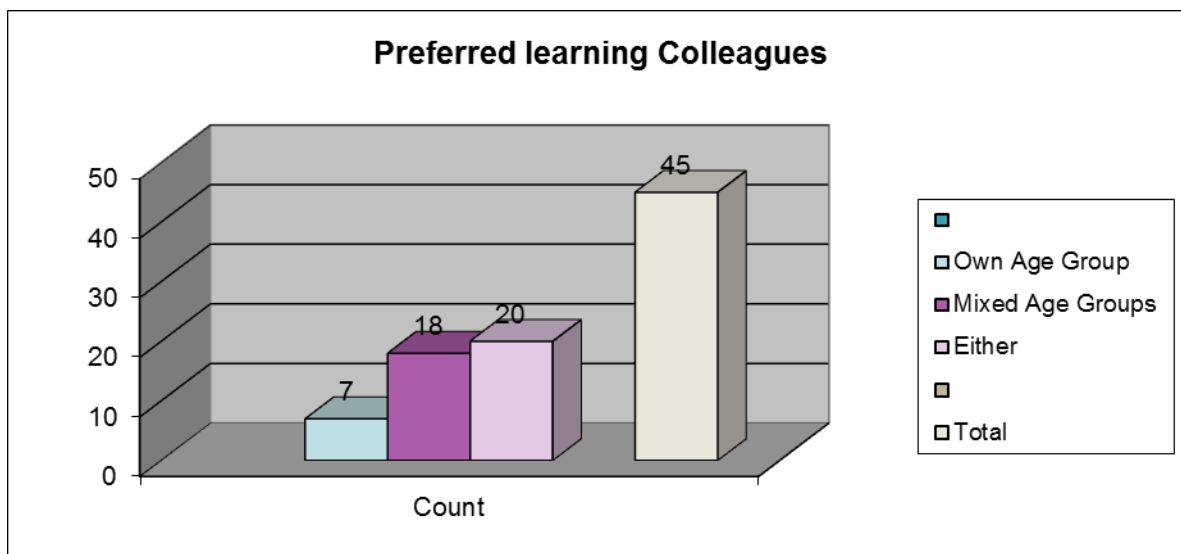
Question 12 – Choosing from the list below, rank these factors in terms of their importance in relation to your reasons for continuing in learning/educational activities, (1= most important etc)

This question provides a degree of insight and understanding into the core motivations behind participation of older learners in learning activities. The question asked participants to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being most important), the importance they associate with the various benefits listed. Some of the respondents only ticked some of the boxes available but the results still provide interesting reading. We can see from the table and the graph that 'Personal enjoyment and fulfilment' was the most important reason participants in this survey remained involved in learning in later life. Intellectual stimulation was the next most important reason indicated by participants with the other factors not coming close in terms of scores achieved.

Table 4.12

Question 12	Rank these items in order of importance, 1=most important					
	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5	Rank 6
Intellectual stimulation	16	6	3	5	1	1
Develop new skills	4	10	12	7	0	0
Personal enjoyment and fulfilment	18	12	5	1	0	0
Gain a qualification for work	2	0	2	5	4	6
Gain a qualification for other reason	0	1	1	1	14	5
Social reasons	5	4	6	8	4	5

Figure 4.12
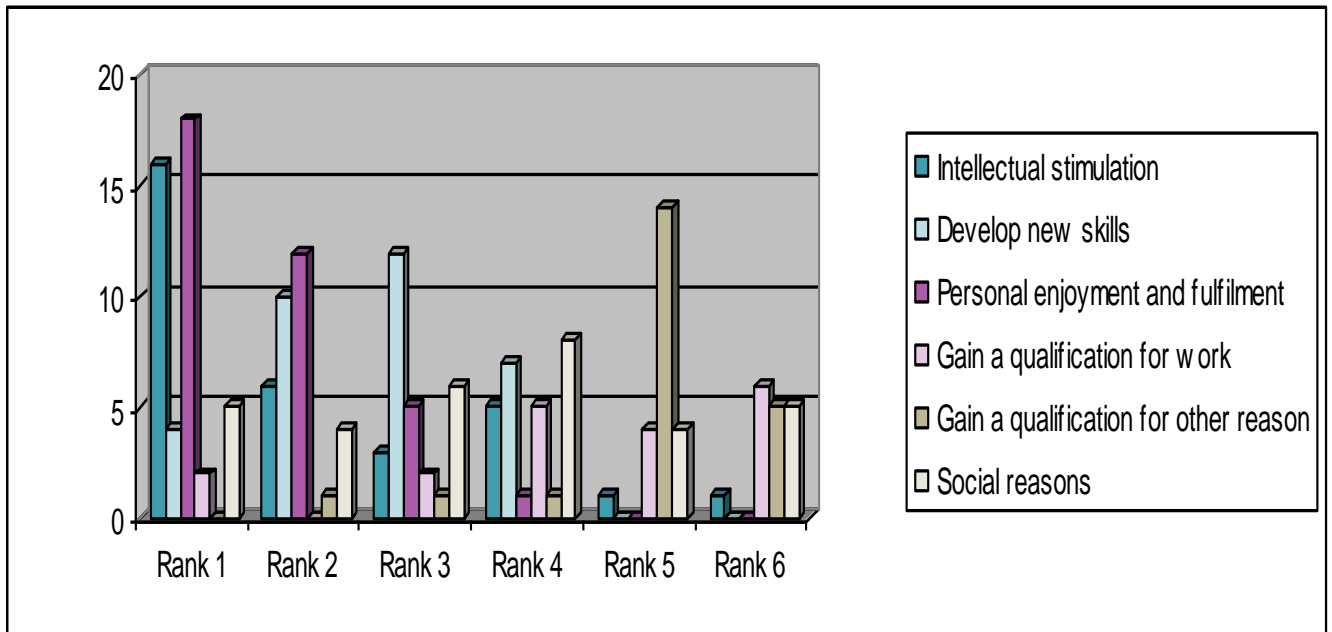
Question 13 - Are there other reasons you continue to participate in learning activities?
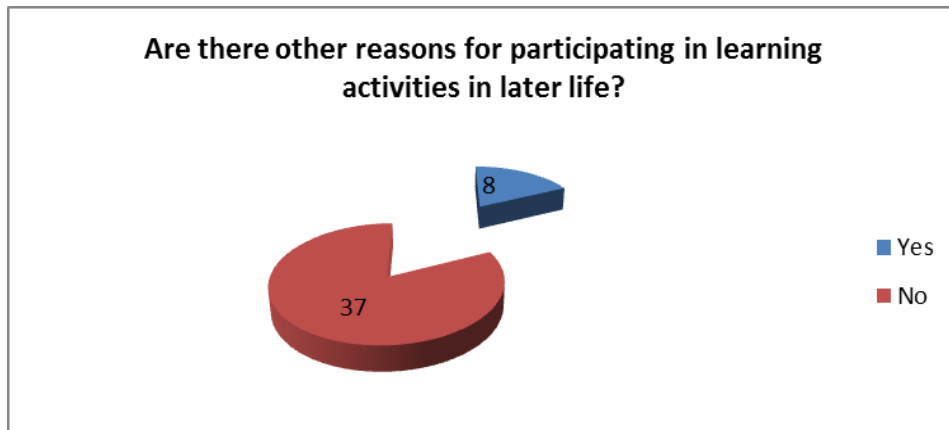
This question was aimed at understanding if there are other reasons not listed above which

are instrumental in motivating older learners to participate in learning activities in later life.

A dialogue box was available to the participants to provide more information if they wished

to do so.

Table 4.13

Answer	Count
Yes	8
No	37
Total	45

Figure 4.13

Eight of the forty five respondents indicated that there are other reasons why they continue to participate in learning activities other than those options available in Question 12. A dialogue box was available to them to elaborate on what those other reasons are and these are the responses received;

1) To pass on my knowledge and skills etc to others, particularly those in or close to my own age group who need assistance in life skills.

2) My abiding interest is in creative writing, (I would like to see more courses for senior learners in this area, it links in with other e) below (Q.14). There are plenty of expensive courses around). The courses I have done help to keep me 'with it', for my writing.

3) The area I work in is health and fitness. Certain aspects relating to these areas can change due to research.

4) Now that I have time on my hands it's 'me time' now.

5) To keep active, learn new things, developing a sense of 'wholeness' as a person.

6) I have two grandchildren and I want to be able to help them with their school projects and for them to understand that learning is meant to be fun and that it doesn't stop when they leave school.

7) To keep up with communication skills.

Question 14 – Please tick which of the issues listed below (if any) may have caused a barrier to your continuing or participating in educational activities? (you may tick more than one item)

A number of possible barriers were identified and the participants in the survey were asked to place a tick beside any that affected them. Some of the participants indicated that a number of the options affected them while others only indicated one or two options. Overall, it can be seen that 'not enough free time' and 'costs' were two of the barriers which attracted the most responses from the participants.

Table 4.14

Barriers to Participation in continuing learning	Count	
1 Difficulty with mobility	1	
2 Difficulty with transportation	2	
3 Not enough free time	18	
4 Difficulties with technology	9	
5 Costs	14	
6 Feeling too old	7	
7 Feeling incapable of dealing with the material	3	
8 Other	2	

Figure 4.14
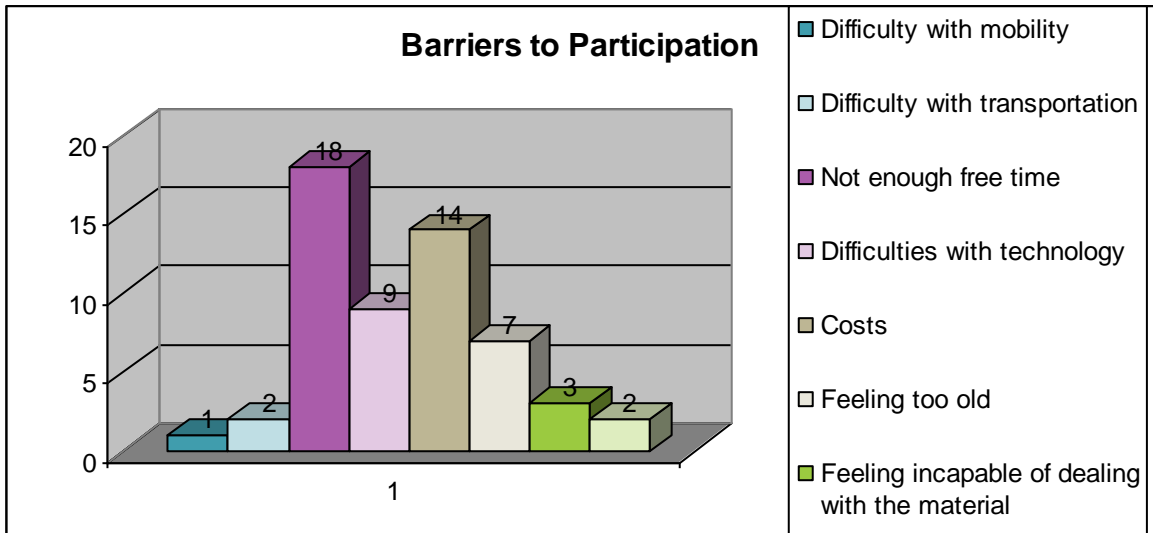
Question 15 – Respondents were asked to rate on a Likert Scale their responses to a statement, "Participating in educational activities is beneficial to me". Their options were;

Strongly Agree, Agree, No Opinion/Don't know, Disagree and Strongly Disagree

This question used a Likert Scale to generate responses, with participants asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement. A clear majority of the respondents (22 out of 24) 'Strongly' agreed with the statement while a further 19 'Agreed' with it. Therefore 41 out of 45 respondents were in agreement to some degree with the statement that 'Participation in educational activities is beneficial to me'.

Table 4.15

Participation in educational activities is beneficial to me	Count
Strongly agree	22
Agree	19
No Opinion / Don't know	4
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
Total	**45**

Figure 4.15
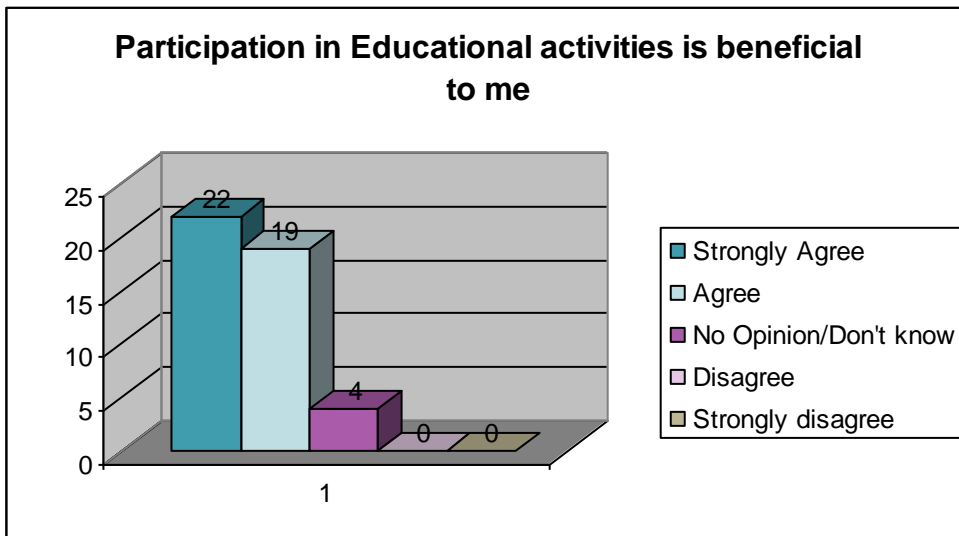
Participation in Educational activities is beneficial to me

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- No Opinion/Don't know
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Question 16 – From the list below, please rank the benefits you feel you get (if any) from involvement in learning/educational activities, (1= most important, 5 = least important)

In this question participants were asked to rank a range of perceived benefits to be gained from involvement in educational/learning activities on a scale of 1 – 5 (with 1 being most important). In the table below it can be seen that 'Enhanced self-esteem' was the clear favourite amongst the respondents in terms of the benefit they receive from involvement in educational / learning activities in later life.

Table 4.16

Rank the benefits you feel you get from involvement in learning/educational activities, (1 = most important, 5 = least important).					
	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5
Enhanced self-esteem	21	4	3	1	4
Feel more independent	2	4	14	8	0
Feel more socially included	10	8	8	6	3
Feel capable of achieving other objectives	10	11	0	5	1
Physical health is improved	1	2	4	3	18

Figure 4.16
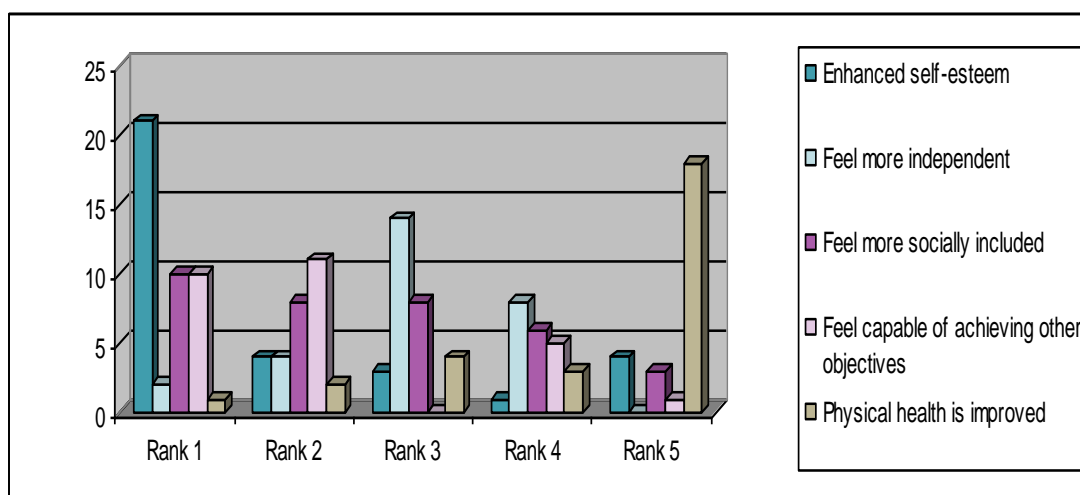
Question 17: Are there other benefits you feel you get from involvement in learning/educational activities?

This was a YES or NO type question with an option to offer more detail if desired by the respondents.

Responses to this question were primarily NO (35 respondents), with 10 answering YES, indicating that there were other benefits not on the list provided in question 15.

The other benefits as described by the 10 respondents who answered the question with a YES are;

- meeting new people (5),

- relaxation (1),

- more understanding of other people (1),

- helping my peers and other older people (1),

- to make up for not learning enough at school (1),

- mental health is improved, keeps depression at bay (1),

- it allows me to relate to my students, gives me more confidence (1).

TABLE 4.17

Answer	Count
Yes	10
No	35
Total	**45**

FIGURE 4.17
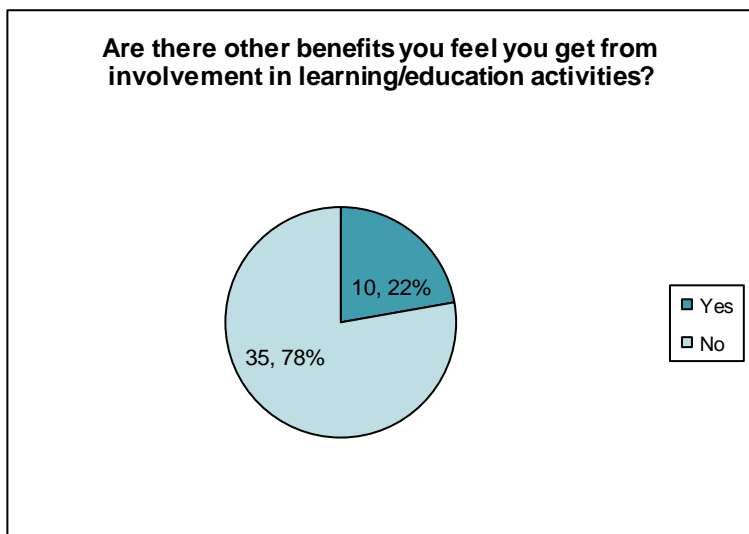
Are there other benefits you feel you get from involvement in learning/education activities?

10, 22%

35, 78%

Yes
No

Question 18 – There are plenty of adult educational activities available for older learners

Using a Likert Scale the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement above, about the availability of adult education activities for older learners. The results clearly show that the majority of respondents agree with this statement (30 out of 45).

Table 4.18

There are plenty of adult educational activities available for older learners	Count
Strongly agree	1
Agree	30
Don't know / no opinion	9
Disagree	4
Strongly disagree	1
Total	**45**

Figure 4.18
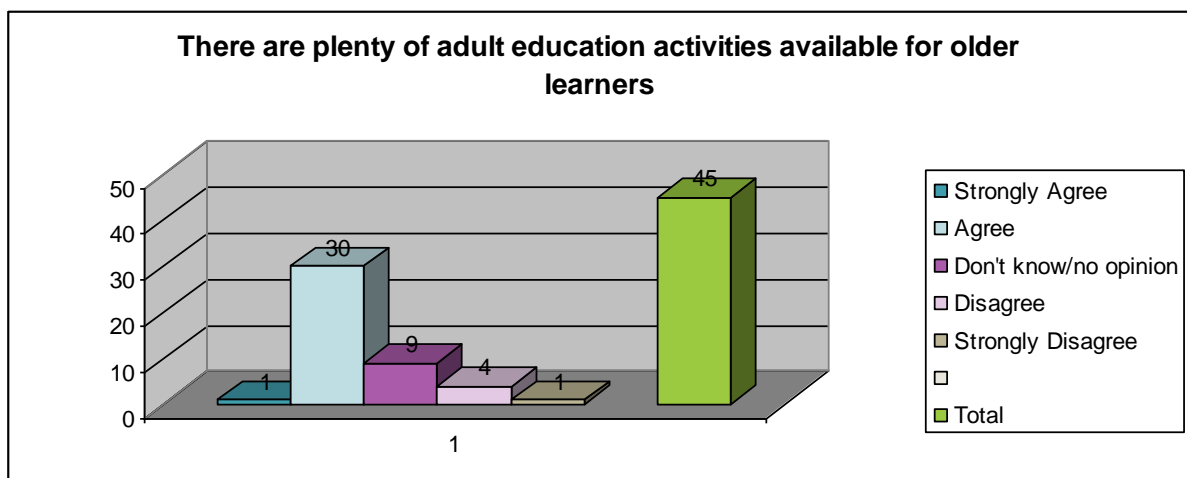
Question 19 - What learning / educational opportunities would you like to see available for older learners?

This question then offered three choices to respondents or "other" which also allowed them to give details of their other preferred option. Of the 3 who indicated "other", a number of suggestions were put forward; -

- ensuring that local courses were available during daytime hours;

- encouragement for creative writing classes should be a focus;

- more local advertising of available classes on notice boards in churches and shops;

- skills and values such as household and budget planning programmes should be made available;

- assistance with funding; more funding as cost is an inhibitor to older learners;

- literacy training

Table 4.19

What learning /educational opportunities would you like to see available for older learners?	Count
Easier access to college / university	9
More local adult educational courses	7
Greater local government support for older learners	26
Other	3
Total	**45**

Figure 4.19

What learning /education opportunities would you like to see available for older learners

Legend:
- Easier access to College/University
- More local adult education courses
- Greater local government support for older learners
- Other

Values: 9, 7, 26, 3, 45
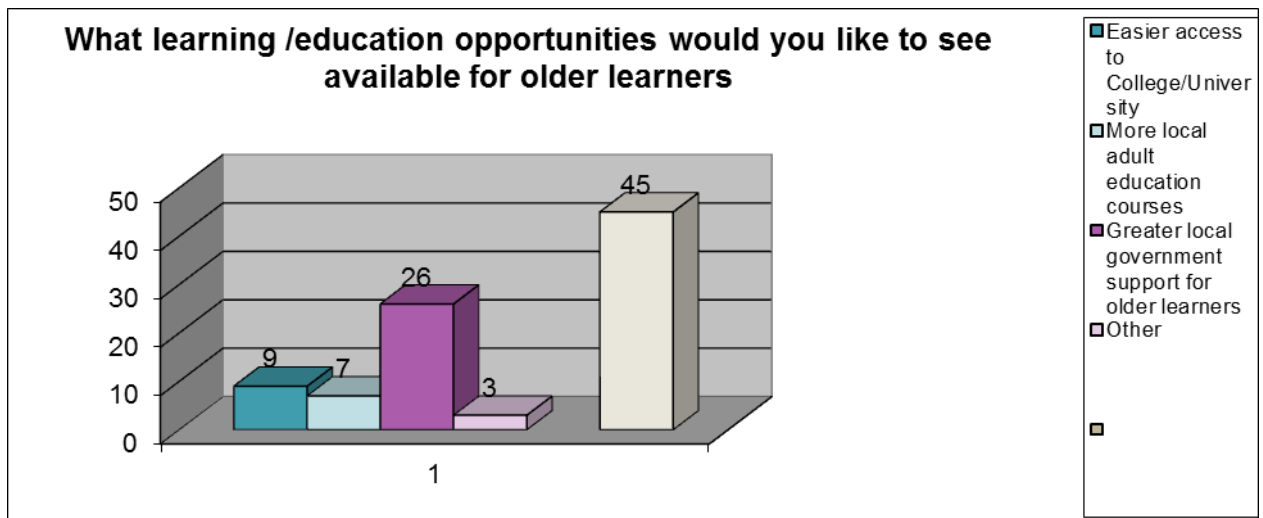
Question 20: Are there any other observations or recommendations you would like to make?

This final question allowed participants to make a contribution which may not have been available from the nature or structure of the preceding 19 questions. Seven of the participants decided to use this question to make a comment/observation/recommendation and their contributions are transcribed below, exactly as they made them in the survey document.

1) Would like to see more courses available during the daytime when older people are free to participate

2) More publicity

3) Greater encouragement for participation in courses

4) At 83 on a sunny morning I want a coffee and not to be thinking too hard

5) University of the Third Age offers personal development and involvement-sampling topics and programmes not available in the formal setting

6) Technology can allow people to keep in touch with friends-family with the use of internet-skype-emails, even if their mobility is reduced.

7) The older learner often lacks confidence to start with. Information sessions at local level (Community based venues where information could be disseminated to catch attention).

The Semi-Structured Interviews

Four semi-structured interviews were completed following the return of the survey questionnaires. Three of the interviewees had participated in the survey questionnaires and the fourth had been involved in the initial pilot testing of the questionnaire. The demographic breakdown of the four interviewees is as follows;

Table 4.20

Interviewee number	Gender	Age Category
Number 1	Male	50-60
Number 2	Female	50-60
Number 3	Male	71-80
Number 4	Female	71-80

The interviewees were all volunteers and had been given a consent form in advance of the interview and had an opportunity to review the contents of the consent form and to ask any questions about the nature or structure of the interview itself. Each of the interviewees also consented to the audio taping of the interviews and were each given a transcript of their interview one week after completion of the interviews. They all subsequently signed and returned a declaration form confirming that the contents of the transcriptions accurately reflected the interview they had participated in.

The nature of the semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in terms of the direction and flow of the discussion and each of the interviews produced varied and individual elements of response which could only be captured in this type of interview. However, the

core themes of lifelong learning and the motivation of older learners to engage in active learning in later life remained central to the discussions and similar responses from the interviewees were observed throughout the four interviews when specific questions were asked of them. A thematic analysis of the transcripts was completed using the guiding principles as set out in Chapter 3. This thematic analysis was guided by the work of Tesch (1990) as described in Creswell (2009) and by Attride-Stirling (2001).

 The four key themes which emerged from this analysis are:-

- Self-esteem and fulfilment are central to learning motivation in later life

- The need for intellectual stimulation and the need to satisfy curiosity are innate human characteristics and central to older learners engagement in learning opportunities

- Lifelong learning is important for well-being

- Older learners experience various barriers (e.g. lack of suitable day-time courses, costs of access to courses, suitably trained and experienced teachers) to continuing their engagement with learning opportunities in later life.

Self-esteem and fulfilment

"I would be building my own self-worth" (reference to doing an MA)

a) *"I do it to push myself, to test myself and to discover new things"* (referring to formal lifelong learning activities).

b) *"I would personally"* (answer to the question 'do you agree with Jarvis when he states that 'Learning is essential as food to human growth?').

"By opening the door to other things you come back a little more fulfilled" (when speaking about continuing to stay abreast of, and continuing to learn about, financial and tax matters)

"I suppose I would have achieved something pretty good" (currently completing an MA in history).

Importance for well-being

Interviewee No 1:

"But given the ageing population there will be new ways to engage people or for people who work within themselves to keep the curiosity going and make life worth living".

Interviewee No 2:

"You live longer, you are part of a community. I know a 90 year old in the UK who goes to IT classes and she sent me a photograph and she is just so proud—and I said to her, have you tried Skype and she said No, I must find out about it, it knocks years off her".(Referring to her friend's on-going involvement in learning),

Interviewee No 3:-

"It seems to be" (Referring to his wife, who has taken up a computer course, feeling better generally about herself after having begun learning how to use then computer).

Interviewee No 4:-

a) *"Yeah, I think that's essential for one's well-being".*

b) *"That's what I was saying to you there that I considered that the chat after a lecture or talk that we have was nearly as important, it might end up in friendships and even if it didn't you have the stimulation of talking to other people and people you haven't met for a month"* (referring to the social contact that involvement in learning provides and its beneficial effect on health).

The need for intellectual stimulation and the need to satisfy curiosity are instinctive human needs

Interviewee No 1:

a) *"The human condition is such that we will look at the night sky and think and be curious about what existence is and what life is about and I think that is a metaphor for lifelong learning, where we continue to wonder who and what we are and who and what the hell is out there".*

b) *It will give us a mental reward or a physical reward and it will stimulate you brain. The whole idea of taking pleasure from learning".*

c) *"Yes, I would like to think that there will be a lot going on that would stimulate you and give you fulfilment"* (referring to the likelihood of continuing being an active learner throughout the rest of his life).

Interviewee No 2:

a) *"I got bitten by the bug"* (referring to continuous involvement in active learning throughout her life).

b) *"I always liked learning"* (referring to doing night classes in various interesting subject matter such as Spanish classes or Carpentry).

c) *"Totally"* (answer to a question on whether the lifelong learning activities provided intellectual stimulation)

d) *"I would have a voracious appetite and I would go off and do other things or buy books, if I was interested in it"* (answer to a question on whether she sought out additional learning material and opportunities beyond the course she was doing).

e) *"It's about learning and when they were saying that to me, I was yeah, you don't have to explain that to me. In my head, it's exactly it. It's like when someone gives you a school book and it's new and you can smell it and feel it and you go, there is stuff in here that I don't know anything about but I am going to know about it and it's learning".*

f) *I do it to push myself, I do it to test myself and I do it to discover new things".*

g) *"I was listening to a programme last night and there is a stone sculptor down in Carlow. She had an exhibition and that's something I have never done and I would love to know a bit more about that".*

Interviewee No 3:

a) *"I think in general it's a thing for interest sake"* (referring to staying involved in learning activities in later life).

b) *"I met a lady who started to learn to fly at 52 years of age and the reason was she was going to be a bit bored. She now has her pilot's license".*

Interviewee No 4:

a) *"Yes, because I know nothing about it and while I might not remember much of what I hear I still feel I have to go to these things and do these things"* (referring to attending a lecture on Cosmic Physics).

b) *"I am just open to all sorts of knowledge"*

c) *"It shows you how interested in all sorts of subjects he is"* (referring to a colleague in the U3A, a retired engineer who gives lectures on subjects as diverse as Greek, the Calendar and Time).

d) *"So, it just shows you, people for one reason or another had what we'll call an ordinary job, that they have an awful more to them"* (referring to a friend who had joined a classical music club).

e) *"There was all sorts of things you could learn"* (referring to the variety of lectures organised in the local U3A group)

Older learners experience specific barriers to continuing their engagement with learning opportunities in later life

Interviewee No 1:

a) *"21 year old students versus 50+ year old man, there was a clash in the classroom"* (referring to an individual who had returned to college to complete a full-time undergraduate degree).

b) *"That the people running them or teaching them maybe not interested enough or skilled enough to make it worth your while going back"*.

c) *"A lot of people would like a day class or course to do"*.

Interviewee No 2:

> *"They don't get things handed to them on a plate and they don't have the wherewithal to go off and pay for it, would question whether there is enough for that group* (referring to the middle classes who receive no financial support to continue with formal learning).

Interviewee No 3:

a) *"I think the way the course is run, I think also the instructor"* (referring to the drop-out rate of older learner from various courses).

b) *One of the things that is missing is the training for the trainers to deal with older people".*

c) *"It's a one-to-one course which I think is very, very important for older people"*

d) *"The other thing is that sometimes in the structured learning situation, the sessions can be too long for older people. Twenty, 25 minutes, have a little break of some sort, but this thing of giving an hour and some instructors get so caught up in what they are trying to pass on that that hour becomes an hour and a half, you could have an alarm clock to try and wake up a lot of people, while they might look awake they are gone".*

e) *"First of all it's the effort of trying to keep up with all that's going on. I certainly find that I am drifting back into it, well I have enough to do looking after my little bit of it without having to look after it for so many other people as well. I think the technicality has become a bit complicated and boring".*

a) *"I have had to make up my mind that I won't even try to go to a night class this coming year simply because Bus Eireann in the cut-backs has set up some kind of strange mixture of circular routes and routes involving other routes. And such a mix-up that people are totally confused and it's as clear as mud what it's all about, even to read a timetable. So I certainly won't be going out".*

b) *"And the trouble is even if we didn't have a recession now there still might not have enough money there because they would have so many students in say the college here that there wouldn't be room to give over space during the day for adults to have classes".*

c) *"You need your average small town for a thing like that in the sense of having things on top of each other or near each other"* (referring to accessibility factor for older learners).

Chapter Summary;

This chapter set out to present the findings from both the questionnaire survey and the semi-structured interviews in a non-analytical manner but in doing so to clearly demonstrate the correlation between the research question and the findings such that the null hypothesis as presented in Chapter 3 could be deemed to be proven. It has been clearly demonstrated in the body of this chapter that the themes of self-fulfilment, intellectual curiosity and well-being are the fundamental drivers behind older learners participation in learning activities and the barriers to participation such as suitable courses, financial obstacles and properly trained educators are the factual obstacles facing older learners in their efforts to commence involvement or continue

involvement in later life learning. However, it is important to delve deeper into the answers given in an effort to achieve that 'distinctive perspective' as described by Withnall (2006) so that the factors that might influence older people to continue or to take up learning activities could be fully understood. In understanding those factors this study might help bring about a new vision of what lifelong learning really means ensuring that older people are part of that vision and that the conceptualisation of later life as a 'social problem' is removed forever (Withnall 2006).

Chapter 5 next will attempt to analyse the connections between the findings and the consequences of the findings and will endeavour to clearly place the voices of the participants in a cohesive and coherent arrangement to demonstrate that the key themes which have emerged from this research study are universal human needs, found in most other research done on this cohort of leaners to date, and thus of significant importance to policy makers and service provider in this country also.

Chapter 5 – Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

The objective of this study has been to investigate what are the key motivational factors which encourage and sustain involvement in learning activities amongst older people. The study has been carried out using a mixed methods approach. A survey questionnaire was distributed to a purposive sample of older learners. Forty five completed questionnaires were returned and the results of those returned questionnaires provided an opportunity to complete a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The next stage in the process was the completion of four semi-structured interviews with four individuals from the target demographic group, one male and one female interviewee in the 50-60 age group and one male and one female interviewee in the 70-80 age group.

These interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed as described in Chapter 3. The full analysis of the findings from both the survey questionnaires and the four interviews will now be completed in this chapter and a discussion of the findings will follow below.

The Research Question

The Research Question is as follows;

 "What are the key motivational factors which encourage and sustain involvement in learning activities in older people?"

The Survey Questionnaire

The Demographic Questions

Questions 1 to 5 are demographic questions as described in Chapter 3. As already outlined, there was an expectation that each question would provide data which would help build a comprehensive picture of the participants in this study such that the analysis of the findings, combined with the qualitative analysis to be completed following the subsequent interviews would provide a deep and rich understanding of the research problem.

Items of interest from the demographic data collected in these five questions include the fact that the 'Professional' employment category was the one that the majority of participants chose in terms of their current or past employment category. This is in keeping with other research done on this area which indicates that past involvement in learning activities is a strong indicator of continuing involvement in later life (Fisher 1983, Lamdin & Fugate1997). This requires making an assumption that those in the 'Professional' working category needed an academic/third level qualification of some sort to practice their profession.

The other demographic pattern of interest is the fact that the largest cohort, (21 of the 45 participants), are in the 61-70 age category with 13 in the 50-60 category, 8 in the 71-80 category and only 3 in the 81+ category. This might indicate a combination of waning interest levels and/or survival rates and other structural barriers (health and mobility etc) as people get older. In the discussion with one of the interviewees the following question and answer gives a possible answer to this demographic result from the questionnaire:

Q; "Can you imagine over the next 10,15, 20 years of your own life, staying involved in learning and wanting to keep closely involved with education? What do you foresee?

A; "No, I think I will drift away. First of all, it's an effort to keep up with all that's going on. I think the technicality has become a bit complicated and boring", (Interviewee No 3).

This answer might be indicative of many older learners, some who could be categorised as "harmony seekers" who have reached a level of contentment with their interpretation of the world and are not interested in further learning (Withnall, 2006).

Other than the above data the other questions produced expected results in that 66% of the participants are married and 53% are retired, while 71% are female and only 29% are male. That statistic is also very much in keeping with other studies done on participation rates of older learners, as in the study done by Withnall "Exploring Influences on Later Life Learning", a focus group approach was used and the gender mix was 70% female and 30% male, (Withnall 2006).

The Key Survey Questions

Questions 6 – 20 were designed to elicit a broad range of information from the participants some of which can be analysed quantitatively. Other questions allowed space for more in-depth answers to be given by the participants and these questions therefore allowed for a qualitative analysis of those responses to be undertaken which when combined with the analysis achieved from the transcripts of the interviews allows for a deep and rich analysis of the research problem overall to be achieved.

The answers provided to Question 6, asking participants to indicate what level of education they had attained, support findings observed earlier in the literature review from other studies of older learners in that most of the participants had previously been involved in learning and education at the tertiary level, as 24 of the 45 participants had a qualification beyond the Leaving Certificate level. As already stated this is in keeping with other studies completed relating to this sector (Fisher 1983, Martin 2003). This result would suggest that having had

positive prior engagement with education and learning is a primary motivating factor in encouraging and sustaining learning activities in later life. This factor is closely associated with having high levels of self-efficacy which means basically having a belief and confidence in one's ability to achieve a given task, and this confidence is usually acquired through past experience (Bandura 1986).

Question 7 continues this theme when it asks participants if they had participated in Adult Education activities in the past with 89% of respondents answering Yes to this question a result that correlates closely with the answers given in Question 6.

However, this figure drops to 58% in Question 8 when participants are asked if they are currently involved in Adult Education activities. This contradicts the evidence from Question 7 and therefore the question arises as to why there is such a significant drop in participation? This question will be addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

In Question 9, 55% of respondents indicated that remaining involved in learning activities was 'very important' to them with a further 27% indicating it was 'important'. These answers were part of a Likert Scale and indicated the highest and second highest score a participant could give to the question. Therefore the question that again arises from this answer is, "why has the rate of participation declined, (as evidenced between Questions 7 and 8), while the majority of the participants continue to place such a high degree of importance on continuing participation? Why would you *not* continue to participate in learning activities if you rate involvement as being either 'very important' or 'important' to you? Possible answers here might be that, while involvement in learning is of significant importance to older people, structural, situational or other barriers might prevent their actual participation and this is an area that should achieve specific attention from service providers and Government agencies tasked with providing services and supports in this area. It is of vital importance that an

understanding of the key obstacles to older learner's participation in learning activities is fully understood, fully analysed and proper corrective action is taken to remove these obstacles thereby ensuring equality of access and availability of suitable courses are primary objectives of government policy in this area.

Question 10 confirms that older learners primarily prefer learning in small informal groups and this is supported to a degree by one of the interviews where a difficulty was experienced by an older individual in returning to an undergraduate degree programme;-

"There was simply a clash of youngish 20 year olds versus a 50–year-old man. There wasn't an engagement of minds" (Interviewee No 1 when describing a neighbours difficulties in settling into a full time undergraduate programme at an Irish university and who eventually left the programme because of these difficulties).

Interviewee No 3 also stated that small informal groups were the preferred format for encouraging participation by older learners and even suggested that "one-to-one" teaching would be best overall if achievable.

However, the next question, Question 11 asks the participants do they have any preference in terms of the age groups they like to learn with and only 7 of the 46 said that they'd prefer to learn with their own age group. Eighteen indicated a preference for mixed age groups and 20 said either age group. So, these responses appear to indicate a broad willingness of older people to engage with all age groups in their learning activities. Findsen (2007) advocates older people asserting their rights to formal education while Glendenning (2001) warns against the dangers of segregating the elderly learners from the young in a practice that he described as "ghettoizing older people". However if the experience of older people is that educational opportunities for them are primarily limited to evening part-time courses then this segregation is in fact already in place. As will be described later in this section, a key

barrier experienced by older people is the lack of available learning opportunities during the day time. This barrier was spoken of by three of the interviewees and was addressed also in a number of the returned questionnaires. This factor echoes work done by Tyler as quoted in Glendenning (2001) whose studies confirmed that older learners are "more likely to enrol for classes held in the daytime, near to their homes, on a convenient bus route, and in better months of the year. In other words age-segregated classes may happen, almost without thought of the tutor or organiser, as a consequence of other decisions" (Tyler 1979, p 11). This barrier to involvement is one that needs further investigation and analysis. It became apparent during this study that seeking self- fulfilment through learning and education while also benefiting both physically and mentally from involvement in learning activities are key reasons why older people continue their engagement with learning activities in later life and it is of vital importance therefore that adequate government resources be allocated to ensure these learners are facilitated in every way possible to achieve those benefits. By providing suitable opportunities for older learners during daylight hours, government would be removing one of the fundamental barriers to participation that older learners experience. Organisations like the U3A movement have become involved in this area specifically because of the lack of suitable opportunities for older people to engage in learning activities during daylight hours and in accessible locations but it should not be left to voluntary organisations alone to fill this fundamental human need. Not only was this a finding of the questionnaire but it was also a prominent refrain during the subsequent interviews.

Personal Enjoyment and Fulfilment & Intellectual Stimulation:
Question 12 was a key question in terms of addressing the research question at the core of this study. The question asked participants to rank, in terms of importance, from a list of 6 options given to them, their reasons for continuing in learning/educational activities. The findings indicate that 'Personal enjoyment and fulfilment' and 'Intellectual stimulation' are

the key reasons that older people stay involved in learning activities in later life (Table 4.12). These factors will be addressed in further detail in the analysis of the semi-structured interviews also. If one of the most important motivations in encouraging engagement in learning in later life is in seeking 'personal enjoyment and fulfilment' this finding supports a number of the research articles discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2) which argue that self-fulfilment and self-actualisation are at the centre of human endeavour and are often found through learning, particularly in later life (Glendenning 2001, Russell 2008, Findsen 2007, Merriam & Cafferella 1999, Russell 2008, amongst others). In the subsequent interviews this theme emerged very strongly where it was obvious that each of the participants found their need for intellectual stimulation and personal fulfilment met to varying degrees by their involvement in learning and educational activities. This engagement with learning as evidenced by these interviews provides support for the assertion made in Chapter 3, that learning is libidinal (Illeris 2002) and that we are all in need of fulfilling that desire and that we are all capable of doing so to our own specific personal levels.

Other Motivational Factors:

The survey questionnaire then attempted in Questions 13 and 14 to find out what other motivating factors might be involved in the older learners decision to stay involved in learning activities in later life. However only 8 of the 45 indicated that there were factors other than those options provided in Question 12, and in Question 13 they were offered the opportunity to describe these other factors. The responses are listed in Chapter 4 at Figure 4.13 and one in particular continues the theme of self-development which has been identified in earlier questions when the following answer was given;

"To keep active, to learn new things, developing a sense of "wholeness' as a person".

This statement by the respondent provides the fundamental answer to the question being investigated by this study. It provides a multiple answer in one short sentence which encapsulates the core motivations behind most elder learner's involvement in learning in later life, *intellectual stimulation and self-development.* Other references to self-development and self-fulfilment were also drawn from the four interviewees and this aspect of the study will be looked at in more detail in the next section of this chapter. What is obviously becoming apparent from these responses and from the quotes taken from the interviews is that people are designed with an innate interest in intellectual stimulation and will endeavour to satisfy that desire throughout their lives in a way that is synonymous with the theories espoused by Maslow, that human desire for self-fulfilment and self-actualisation is achieved through engagement with learning and educational activities throughout one's life, and in particular in later life.

Barriers:

Question 14 sought to understand what barriers older people face when attempting to engage in learning activities in later life. Seven options were offered to them with the eight being 'other'. Two indicated that there were 'other' barriers but did not complete the dialogue box available to describe the other barriers that they experience. Costs and lack of free time were the two options which generated the highest responses of the seven options provided. The remaining barriers are those which have been encountered in other similar studies such as difficulties with technology, mobility and transport issues.

The lack of available time is an aspect of the answer that does create a need to look at the statistics closely. A possible explanation for this lack of time could lie in the fact that 75% (34 of the 45 participants) are under 70 and possibly may still be engaged in other activities which restrict their free time, however only 35% (16 of the participants) confirmed that they are still working to some extent. This reference to lack of free time is puzzling when

consideration is given to the fact that so many of the respondents confirmed that engagement in learning activities provided an array of benefits to them. A deeper understanding of this specific barrier to engagement is worthy of further research and understanding.

A similar result had been found in a study completed by Dench and Regan (1999) for the UK Department of Education and Employment when it commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies in the UK to explore the impact of learning on older learners. Their studies also focused on those over 50 years of age, similar to this research project. One of their key findings was as follows "The most common reasons for not learning were a lack of time and a lack of interest in learning". On the positive side they found that "the most important reasons for learning were intellectual, for example, wanting to keep their brains active". They also state that "85% of learners reported a positive impact on learning on at least one of the following areas: their enjoyment of life, their self-confidence, how they felt about themselves; satisfaction with other areas of their life; and their ability to cope" (Dench & Regan 1999). Question 15 asked participants to rate on a Likert Scale their responses to the statement that 'Participating in educational activities is beneficial to me'. Twenty two respondents 'Strongly agreed' and 19 more 'Agreed' with the statement, with 4 indicating a neutral stance and none disagreeing with the statement. Therefore, with more than 91% of the respondents believing that involvement in learning is beneficial to them in some manner it raises the question of whether or not sufficient opportunities and supports are being given to this sector to encourage greater awareness and involvement amongst those not participating.

 On the basis that nearly all the respondents believe that learning is beneficial to them (none believe that it is bad for them) then the core research question is now close to being answered i.e. "what are the key motivational factors which encourage and sustain involvement in learning activities in older learners?" One answer that must now surely be accepted is "because it is beneficial to me". However this answer only goes some way towards providing

the fullest picture possible of the research question and Questions 16 and 17 will attempt to develop this answer further by asking the participants to identify what those benefits are and to rank them in terms of importance to themselves.

Enhanced Self-Esteem: (the path to self-actualisation).
Question 16 offered the participants five specific benefits which they were asked to rank in terms of their importance to them on a scale of 1 to 5, with1 being most important and 5 being least important. The findings are very clear in that the highest scoring benefit, receiving 21 first choice marks, was 'Enhanced self-esteem'. This benefit outscored the next highest scored benefits by more than 100% with 'Feel more socially included' and 'Feel capable of achieving other objectives' each only scoring 10 first choice marks. *Therefore this element of the study clearly indicates that older learners participate because of the feelings of enhanced self-esteem that involvement in learning gives them.*

When combined with the answers given at Question 12, where it was found that 'Personal enjoyment and fulfilment' and 'Intellectual stimulation' were the two high scoring items given as reasons why older people continue involvement in learning activities, then it would appear from this study that older learners are engaged in learning activities primarily to achieve a level of self-fulfilment or self-actualisation that has been described earlier in Chapter 3. This need to achieve self-actualisation has been observed in numerous other studies done on older learners (Russell 2008, Findsen 2007, Merriam & Cafferella 1999) with Kidd (1973) suggesting that adult learning is primarily concerned with self-discovery, self-expression and self-fulfilment. The analysis of the responses given to questions 12 and 16 in this study provide a clear link to the findings of previous studies and allow this study to reach the conclusion that the research question, as phrased in the form of the null hypothesis, is proven to be true. However further corroborating evidence for this assertion will be generated from the analysis of the interview transcripts and the combination of both research

methods in this case will thus ensure that the assertion can be deemed to be both reliable and valid albeit generated from a relatively small research group.

The above reasons why older adults engage in learning activities in later life are important not only for the individuals themselves but for a society which espouses lifelong learning as enriching the cultural fabric of society and as adding to social cohesion through personal, community and cultural development (Maunsell et al, 2000). If the individuals experience feelings of enhanced self-esteem and achieve personal enjoyment and fulfilment from involvement in learning activities, then it is of vital importance that society ensures that the provision of suitable learning opportunities are available for all learners throughout all their lives.

Question 17 attempted to develop this topic further by asking participants if there are other benefits they feel they get from their involvement in learning/educational activities. Ten of the respondents answered Yes to this question and their varied responses are detailed in section 4.2 Q17, but one in particular is worth noting in that it states "my mental health is improved, keeps depression at bay". This reference to a mental health benefit is found in various studies done on this subject (Pinquart 2002, McNeill & Teague 1987).

In 1999 The Irish Museum of Modern Art engaged with a group of older local residents in a programme of inclusion and education and Fleming provides excellent quotes from participants on this programme which provide further support for the belief that older adults benefit from their involvement in learning activities *"it stops you from getting Alzheimer's, I'm hoping it does"*, and another who states, *"…'cos I find if you sit back and do nothing and look at the telly you go brain dead. You would, you'd go melancholy…"* (Fleming 2000, Fleming & Gallagher 1999).

Question 18 asked participants if they believed that there are plenty of adult educational activities available for older learners. This question was structured as a scale of options from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). This gave a surprising result in that 30 (67%) of participants 'Agreed' with this statement. This seems to contradict an item listed as a barrier which came up during the interviews where lack of day-time courses was highlighted as being a difficulty for older learners.

Question 19 continued this theme by asking the participants what learning/educational opportunities they would like to see available for older learners and while three choices were offered the respondents were also offered an opportunity to provide further suggestions in the dialogue box provided (details at 4.3 Q19). The majority answered the core question by indicating option 3 as their preference, 'Greater Local Government Support for Older Learners'. However, the other issues raised by the participants included "ensuring that local courses were available during daylight hours". This issue has now been raised a number of times and will also be raised again during the next section dealing with the interviews. A separate issue of cost was also raised and this will also be covered in the next section.

Question 20 allowed participants to make any other observations or recommendations they wished and these are listed earlier in chapter 4.

The first item listed is the need to have courses available during daytime, a recurring theme. Personal development was mentioned at item 5) while lack of confidence was raised as an issue but wasn't elaborated on in the answer.

Summary
Overall the survey questionnaires have provided a combination of expected results with some surprising and unexpected results. The surveys have helped develop an understanding of the key factors which motivate older learners to engage and sustain engagement in learning

activities and have provided a solid platform on which to further build knowledge of this important cohort of society. In summary it can be said that the analysis of the survey questionnaires suggests that a journey towards self-actualisation is the primary, but often unspoken, goal of older learners. The detailed thematic and qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews will now enhance the survey findings and a final summation and conclusions section will then be completed in this chapter.

The Semi-Structured Interviews

As described earlier in Chapter 3, the semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed, with this thematic analysis guided by the work of Tesch (1990) as described in Creswell, (Creswell 2009, p.186). Four key themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews as follows:

- Self-esteem and fulfilment are central to learning motivation in later life,

- The need for intellectual stimulation and the need to satisfy curiosity are innate human characteristics and central to older learners engagement in learning opportunities,

- Lifelong learning is important for well-being,

- Older learners experience specific barriers to continuing their engagement with learning opportunities in later life.

The above four themes are mirrored in the findings from the survey questionnaire in that the two primary reasons given by participants for older learners engaging in (and sustaining engagement in) learning activities in later life are:-

1) Enhanced self-esteem, personal enjoyment and fulfilment:

2) Intellectual stimulation.

These two reasons were the predominant answers given to Questions 12 and 16 in the survey questionnaire. As can be seen in Figure 4.12 'Intellectual Stimulation' and 'Personal Enjoyment and Fulfilment' both scored the highest points in the responses from the participants in relation to their reasons for continuing in learning/educational activities in later life.

Question 16 dealt with the benefits that older learners feel they get by participating in learning/educational activities. We saw in Figure 4.16 that Enhanced Self-Esteem was the primary benefit that was chosen by the participants in answering this question:

These findings are further supported by the themes that emerged from the structured interviews. This section will now look at specific quotes taken from the interview transcripts which will provide further supporting corroboration of the assertion made in the previous section that the null hypothesis has been proven. Specific quotes have been given in Chapter 4 that correlate with these particular findings such as;

Interviewee No 1:

"The human condition is such that we will look at the night sky and think and be curious about what existence is and what life is about and I think that is a metaphor for lifelong

learning, where we continue to wonder who and what we are and who and what the hell is out there". Wondering about 'what existence is' is a fundamental element of human curiosity and the above reference to lifelong learning and the search for meaning in life provides a clear an unambiguous support for the thesis that is being investigated by this study in that learning in later life is primarily about the individual seeking self-actualisation through satisfying intellectual curiosities. Russell (2008) makes similar reference in her study with the belief that older learners are involved in an "ontological search for meaning throughout life".

Interviewee No 4:

"I am just open to all sorts of knowledge"

Interviewee No 3:

"By opening the door to other things you come back a little more fulfilled"

Interviewee No 1:

"I would be building my own self-worth" (reference to doing an MA)

There are a number of other quotes listed in Chapter 4 which provide plenty of supporting corroboration for the main findings from the survey questionnaire i.e. that learning in later life is primarily motivated by the need to satisfy intellectual curiosities and the need to be self-fulfilled, as well as the other two key themes of 'Well-being' and 'Barriers to participation'.

Well-Being:

 "But, given the ageing population there will be new ways to keep the curiosity going and make life worth living as you get older" (Interviewee No 1). This statement is particularly strong in its linking of the need to satisfy learning needs with well-being to the extent that it is suggesting that life is not worth living without satisfying intellectual needs.

Interviewee No 2 referred to longevity in the following two statements about staying engaged with learning in later life

"You live longer, you are part of a community" and referring to a friend in her 90's still passionate about learning about new technology such as Skype and emails she said the following, *"it knocks years off her"*.

Interviewee No 4 referred to the social benefits of being active and being open to new experiences and challenges and made the following statement in a general discussion on learning and well-being,

"In some ways there are a lot of (older) people who are waiting to die. That is a harsh way of putting it. It's the truth. Their life doesn't really have a lot going on and they have deliberately eased down but they could have a long time to go and that easing down can last a long time and they could be dissatisfied and uncomfortable and unhappy during that time. Whereas, by opening the door to other things, even for example, just going out for the day and going somewhere you didn't plan to go, you come back a little bit more fulfilled and the other part of it is that you can meet people in a different way".

This interviewee also spoke at length about the learning that comes from travel and from pushing yourself to understand timetables and also in learning about the new places you might go on a whim,

"now that I am free and retired and have the free time and the free travel, my wife and I would go on a lot of trips and travel and we might go in on the Luas and pass Heuston and decide we are going to Cobh. Absolutely on a whim!"

This individual has helped other older people to familiarise themselves with their rights to free travel and to make use of this service and he would see this advocacy as a civic duty,

"It's important to pass those things onto people, and I am glad to say that probably I have caused CIE a lot of problems because a lot more people are using their free travel than used to".

This is in keeping with his firm belief that this is an important form of lifelong learning and he also extends that to teaching others and helping in his community with advice on personal budgeting and also in ensuring older people in his community get their correct social welfare entitlements,

"..and probably I have turned into a bit of a nuisance for the department of Social Welfare".

But this level of community activity combines a dual benefit in not only helping his neighbours but also providing a degree of fulfilment to the giver. The learning that occurs through this form of interest in the world and having that on-going curiosity was also echoed in Withnall (2006) "Those able to afford it also talked enthusiastically of informal learning through travel undertaken during retirement since long-haul flights were now cheaper and distant countries more accessible".

Interviewee No 4 saw the social benefits of remaining engaged in learning in later life through involvement in the U3A organisation,

"It's a focus once a month, that you sit down after the lecture and have a cup of tea and chat and maybe with a bit of luck friendship will develop out of it which of course I think is

absolutely crucial for people of any age but even more so at retirement age. Yeah, I think it's essential for one's well-being".

These types of comments and observations were widespread throughout the interviews and were also observed in the survey questionnaire and are very much evident in the literature on the subject, as Fleming stated in his paper presented at Scutera, (2000), "Adult education has serious health implications- Longevity and well-being", while Dench & Regan (2000) state "learning can contribute to health and social interaction and can help to enrich an older person's life usually as part of a wider set of activities".

The observations from this small study would suggest that Government support for a meaningful Lifelong Learning policy should place older learners themselves at the centre of the making policy decisions as the older person must remain the central key part of any policy-making decisions. However the literature still suggests that older learners are not genuinely part of the vision of a learning society and are still "largely marginalised in educational policy circles in Europe and beyond" (Withnall 2000).

"Other Barriers to Participation"

Other barriers faced by older learners were also discussed during the interviews and included some expected ones, such as costs and local availability of learning opportunities, but also included one or two unexpected examples such as the experience and quality of teachers themselves or the structure of the lessons;

Interviewee No 3*; "I think the way the course is run. It's a one-to-one course which I think is very important for older people. Yeah, no more than three or four",* (this is in keeping with Question 10 of the questionnaire, see Table 4.10, where 30 respondents from the 45 said that they preferred to learn in small informal groups).

"One of the things that is missing is the training for trainers to deal with older people" (Interviewee No 3).

In one of the survey responses this aspect was also stated in one of the replies as follows;

"Poor quality instructors; occasional lack of respect / understanding of what older students can contribute".

This was echoed by Interviewee No 1 who stated,;

"The people running them or teaching them might not be interested enough or skilled enough to make it worth your while going".

This interviewee also spoke of the difficulty a friend experienced in returning to a full time undergraduate programme and being unable to cope with the age gap, he being in his fifties whereas most of the students were just finished secondary school. This is a very interesting theme which merits further more extensive research than this study has the scope to complete.

Another particular barrier referred to in the discussion on the Survey Questionnaires and referred to by two of the interviewees is a structural barrier in that most 'adult education' provision being available only in the evening;

"I note from the class I run is that a lot of people who are at home during the day obviously would like a day class or course to do. Day courses by and large are the certificated ones. A lot of people would like it the other way around" (Interviewee No1),

Interviewee No 3 stated;

"There should be day time courses for older people in particular, the U3A people meet at two in the afternoon and Maynooth meet at eleven in the morning and there is another one

where they meet up in the Chester Beatty library and they meet at, I think, eleven in the morning and again all of them in the U3A say that if you are trying to organise classes we don't want to be driving at night, and there's winter time and that's another factor".

These are areas that needs specific attention as the conflict between the needs of older learners and the economic realities of suitable course provision at suitable times is one that must test even the most supportive of governments and relevant service providers. However, older learner's needs should not be subordinated to other learners needs because of economic imperatives as the research suggests that social integration and social cohesion are the outcomes of fully inclusive lifelong learning policies. Withnall (2000) quoting Schuller & Bostyn (1992) contend that older people are entitled to educational opportunities as compensation for lack of these earlier in their lives and he also quotes Glendenning (1997) who speaks about educational provision for older people in terms of emancipating them to take control of their own lives and thus remove the marginalisation and structured dependency of older people. These are issues of extreme social importance and worthy of further extensive research.

Survey question answered:

It can be seen from the above quotations, taken from both the interviews and from the analysis of the survey questionnaire that the key thesis of this study has been satisfactorily answered. Older learners are primarily motivated to engage in learning activities in later life to satisfy intellectual and personal development needs. This report corroborates findings from the other research studies as described in the literature review in chapter 2 and has also identified below a number of other observations which are worthy of more detailed investigation.

Other Observations

Unjustifiable Homogeneity

Withnall (2006) wrote about the "unjustifiable homogeneity" within critical educational gerontology that is often assumed among older people. However she goes on to say "as has been pointed out with some irony, what older people actually have in common is their heterogeneity". This heterogeneity was evident in the semi-structured interviews in that the views and opinions expressed by the four interviewees were as varied as they were individual.

For example, one of the interviewee's spoke of one of the benefits of lifelong learning as follows *"that you are confronting your ideas through other people"*. This use of language suggests a continuing willingness and interest in challenging and developing oneself whereas others wanted to continue learning in a more leisurely or socially beneficial way *"by going somewhere for the day you can come back more fulfilled"* (referring to the benefits and the learning involved in taking the time to travel).

In answering a question relating to gaining further academic qualifications *"Would the qualification or accreditation from that course be important?"* one interviewee answered, *"Not in the slightest",* while a similar question put to another interviewee (when discussing the on-going involvement of that interviewee in an MA programme) *"but you haven't written it off yet?"* answered, *"No I haven't, because I feel my name is on that and I got to get it. Just as you mention that it's flashing into my mind, have I reached my peak? In other words can I go further?"*

These responses indicate that older people are no different from younger people in that they are as just as wide-ranging and individual in their world views and motivations for

completing any task as any other age group. Tyler (1978) strongly makes the case for arguing the heterogeneity of older adults, "two major assumptions must be challenged, first that all people over a given arbitrary age (60 or 65 for instance) can be lumped together and dealt with as though there were a homogenous group" while Findsen (2007) states "it is prudent to consider that while older people may be perceived as a homogenised group by those who think of themselves as 'not old', there is a marked differentiation within third age cohorts. Just as the life experience differences between a 20-year-old and a 50-year-old are likely to be very pronounced, so the differences between a 50 year old and an 80 year old can be similarly acknowledged". This age related difference could also be observed from the noticeable differences that emerged from the semi-structured interviews, when observing the different level of focus placed on the social and inter-personal benefits associated with learning activities evidenced by the older two interviewees compared with the younger interviewees. The younger interviewees placed no emphasis on the social benefits at all, but focused more keenly on the nature of the learning material itself with the primary benefit to them being the intellectual stimulation they achieved through their learning activities.

In addition it was also noticeable how the older interviewees made reference to wanting to help others and to give back to society whereas those sentiments did not appear in the analysis of the younger interviewee's transcripts,

"Any learning that I do now is to help people with their budgeting, I find things are changing so rapidly and people are under serious stress in regard to their budgets that I am having to learn to be able to help them along. In some ways I would prefer not to be having to learn those things" (Interviewee No 3).

This interviewee was very conscious of his community duty and this had echoes of Findsen's (2007) study which examines the Freirean concepts of adult educators working alongside

marginalised older adults. Interviewee No 4 also made similar reference in a statement she made *"I was trying to run the course on my own with the help of a retired nurse"*. This quote refers to her commitment to the U3A group and her role in encouraging other older members to participate as she sees it as an empowering activity with many benefits for the individuals involved, *"Yeah, I think it's essential for one's well-being"*.

This interest in giving back something to society was also captured in the survey questionnaire at Q13, where participants were asked if there were other reasons they participated in learning activities in later life. In the dialogue box there were two examples of this motivation;

a) *"To pass on my knowledge and skills etc to others, particularly those in or close to my own age group who need assistance in life skills"*

b) *"I have two grandchildren and I want to be able to help them with their school projects and for them to understand that learning is meant to be fun and that it doesn't stop when they leave school"*.

However the heterogeneity of older learners was also in evidence in this question when comparing the above two answers to some of the other answers below, each one expressing a different motivation and in doing so confirming the absolute heterogeneity of older learners;

c) *"My abiding interest is in creative writing, the courses I have done help to keep me with it"*

d) *"Now that I have time on my hands it's me time now"*.

(See Figure 4.13, Chapter 4).

Prior Learning Experiences

Two of the interviewees expressed some anger at how their early educational experiences had a negative impact on them and this factor may have created an unwanted barrier to engaging fully with learning in later life. While it was evident from the interviews that these participants have been very actively involved in learning activities throughout their lives it appears that early life educational issues may have still caused them difficulties,

"Just one small thing, it's very personal. I think an awful lot of my lack of ability in a sense in the academic sphere was when I went to school I was changed from using my left hand to using my right hand. For years I have always felt that my thinking processes were up the creek. Throw that in somewhere if you want". (Interviewee No. 4). This particular individual has always stayed involved to some extent in education and learning and is currently completing a Masters degree programme but has expressed some negative sentiment towards education during the interview,

"Well you see, I had a bit of a negative feeling towards exams, I suppose having failed exams I am afraid of failing by sitting down and getting through the work and I'm afraid of succeeding also. Now the two of these might seem opposites but I read somewhere that that can be the case. I thought it might be something interesting for your studies". (Interviewee No 4).

Interviewee No 1 also expressed some negative sentiments towards education but yet has been involved professionally with teaching throughout his whole life

"I have got to be careful of imparting certain cynical, negative feelings about education. I have this current running through me, I think it's all my life, ever since school.....but the whole machine that is education, the whole area from grind schools right through to courses to suit everyone and tailoring education, selling education overseas, trying to bring in the

Chinese, the Koreans with the money, it's all like an industrial machine……..there is a cynical side of me that would probably keep me from engaging".

These are interesting areas that would merit further separate studies but yet also have a bearing on many individual motivations for staying involved in learning in later life. Interviewee No 1 suggested that any engagement with learning he needs or desires to do now can be done privately without engaging with the 'machine'. This approach to lifelong learning is not uncommon amongst older learners and has been the subject of many studies including Billet (2010), who sees lifelong learning as being a daily occurance through normal everyday interactions, to Roberson and Merriam (2005), whose studies on the area of Self-Directed Learning in Older Learners bear similarities to this interviewee's ideas on the subject.

Costs

At questions 13 and 14 in the survey questionnaires, a number of responses given indicated that 'costs' are a particular barrier to older people's involvement in learning activities. 14 of the participants ticked it in the options available to them (however this question did allow the participants to indicate more than one barrier if they wished). In question 13 one of the respondents had also stated that "there are plenty of expensive courses around", while at question 20 "assistance with funding" was suggested as a support that should be available to older learners. During the interviews the topic of costs also came up during the discussions with the participants;

"I have found that the courses that I was curious about maybe were a little bit costly" (Interviewee No 1).

"There is the middle class who don't get things handed to them on a plate and they don't have the wherewithal to go off and pay for it, I would question whether there is enough for

that group", (Interviewee No 2, referring to the lack of grants and supports for people to take up third level programmes).

As has been outlined in the section on barriers to participation, perhaps costs should also become part of the discourse on older learner's needs and specific provision made to ensure that this deterrent is overcome along with those mentioned earlier such as suitable daytime courses, staffed by suitably qualified teachers.

Summary of Findings

This study has attempted to understand what motivates older people to engage in learning activities in later life and hoped to also find out what factors sustain that involvement and what barriers obstruct that involvement.

It can be seen from the literature review that specific motivational factors have been identified as being universally applicable to older adults in this area, such as cognitive interest, social interaction, personal development, enhanced sense of well-being (both physical and mental) and enhanced self-esteem. All of these factors are evident in the findings of this study, thus it can be confidently stated that the evidence gleaned from the participants in this study (both the survey respondent group and the interviewee group) suggests that they are primarily motivated to continue (and sustain) active engagement in learning activities in later life by curiosity, social factors, sense of well-being and to satisfy personal developmental needs.

As described in the literature review, the human motivation to achieve any task is multi-dimensional and complex and is similarly so in relation to this research question. However, in the literature review section, particular emphasis was noted in many other studies that the quest to achieve self-actualisation, "to be all that one can be" (Maslow 1958), was at the heart of older people's motivation to continue engaging in learning in later life.

This study paid particular attention to that underlying theme and the findings in this study suggest that the two main motivational factors identified **1)** enhanced self-esteem and personal fulfilment along with **2)** intellectual stimulation, are in fact the foundations on which becoming fully self-actualised is built, therefore it could be argued that, without it being explicitly acknowledged by individual older learners, they are sub-consciously in pursuit of that goal nonetheless.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter the combined analysis of the survey questionnaires and the interview transcripts have provided credible evidence that there are three main motivating factors that encourage and sustain involvement in learning activities by older learners.

Those three motivational factors can be described as follows:

1) Enhanced self-esteem and self-fulfilment are key motivating factors in older peoples engagement with learning activities in later life,

2) The need for intellectual stimulation and the need to satisfy curiosity are innate human characteristics and central to older learners engagement in learning activities,

3) Lifelong learning is important for well-being, (both physical and mental).

These findings are indicative of research results from many other studies carried out in this area. An interpretation of their importance to the well-being and development of an individual might suggest that these factors are essentially the necessary components in the individuals (possibly sub-conscious) efforts to seek growth and personal development to the

extent envisioned by Maslow, as in becoming fully self-actualised. A deeper study of this particular aspect of human motivation would be a worthwhile extension of this study.

The key barriers to continuing engagement in learning activities in later life that emerged from the study are:

1) Appropriate courses need to be available during daylight hours,

2) Older learners prefer smaller less formal learning settings,

3) Specialised training for teachers of older students is deemed a necessary factor to ensure a successful engagement for the older learner,

4) Costs of access to courses remains a deterrent to wider participation

A number of recurring themes were observed in the study and give rise to thoughts of further more detailed research as being appropriate and worthwhile. Areas for further research could include a more detailed analysis of the heterogeneity of 'older people' and the impact that factor has on issues such as provision of services or in the structuring and content of various courses. Another area might be to look at the benefits that would flow from including older people in any policy decision making which affects their lives and that lifelong learning policies be more than 'sloganeering' on behalf of state agencies. The area of past educational experiences and its impact on continuing education would also make for a very worthwhile research study.

Conclusions

Older learners are motivated to engage in learning activities and to sustain that engagement through a combination of some or all of the following factors,

- to be intellectually stimulated

- to achieve enhanced self-esteem

- for self-fulfilment and personal development

- for a sense of well-being

- for social reasons

Future Perspectives

While this study has been small scale in its structure and reach, it has nonetheless provided interesting and potentially valuable insights into factors which impact on older people with particular reference to their engagement with learning opportunities in later life.

The study has produced a number of other interesting findings that are worthy of further research and investigation. The apparent lack of suitable day-time courses for older learners is a key issue which is worthy of deeper investigation as this form of structural barrier would appear to run counter to the official approach as evidenced in the Irish Government's White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life (2000), in which they state "the White Paper marks the adoption of lifelong learning as the 'governing principle' of education policy in the Republic of Ireland" (Maunsell et al, 2000).

If the reality is that older people are not being included in this 'governing principle' through effective exclusion by not having suitable courses available to them, then Ireland might also

be one of the countries referred to by Withnall (2000) and Jarvis (2001) when they state that *few* countries include older people in their national policies for lifelong learning (Withnall 2000, Jarvis 2001). Therefore the following statement might also apply to Ireland, that "Lifelong learning continues to be viewed narrowly, as training for work and training in work, directed primarily at young and middle-aged people" (NIACE 2000).

Another area of interest which would merit additional research would be the investigation of the effects of Irish educational methods from the 1930s onwards, on older learners' engagement with learning in later life, as this was a theme noted from the interviews in particular. The research suggests that a key contributor to engagement by older learners is having a positive prior experience. If, for many older people in Ireland, their early educational experiences were negative, then perhaps it might be a valuable exercise to fully understand the effect this has on their willingness to engage in learning in later life and attempt to find suitable methods of overcoming this deterrent.

Finally, while the core research question has been specifically answered through this study, the changing demographic patterns as highlighted earlier in the TILDA report, suggests that on-going research into the changing learning needs of this growing cohort of society is of fundamental importance to our society as a whole. The argument posed in the abstract that what is needed is a "new insight providing an understanding of what education and learning means in the context of their own lives in order to better understand the factors which might influence older people to continue or take up learning activity" (Withnall 2006) is now more necessary than ever. Such a study could make a valuable contribution to our understanding of this important area and lead to opportunities for practitioners, service providers and older people themselves to separately benefit from its finding and in doing so for society itself to be improved in the process.

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