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**Full and Part Time Mature Learner Experiences in Irish Institutes of Technology: A Mixed Methods Enquiry**

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**A dissertation presented to Dublin City University in fulfilment of the requirements for the Professional Doctorate in Education**

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**Declaration**

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed:

ID No:

Date:

**Dedication**

*For those who are gone, but remain in my heart.*

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S Hindsight interview notes, Darragh/Freddie/Mary/Sinead

T Letter from Dr. Áine Finan, critical friend

U Redacted hindsight interview transcript, Darragh

V Redacted hindsight interview transcript, Freddie

W Redacted hindsight interview transcript, Mary

X Redacted hindsight interview transcript, Sinead

**Acronyms**

EPALE European Platform for Adult Learning in Europe

EU European Union

HEA Higher Education Authority

IoT Institute of Technology (unspecified)

IPA Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

ISSE Irish Survey of Student Engagement

IT Institute of Technology (specified)

NFQ National Framework of Qualifications

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QQI Quality and Qualifications Ireland

REACH Regional Assistive Technology Connection to Higher Education

SIPTU Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union

SUSI Student Universal Support Ireland

UK United Kingdom

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

VEC Vocational Educational Committee

**Abstract**

**Carol Moran**

**Full and part time mature learner experiences in Irish Institutes of Technology: A mixed methods enquiry.**

As the number of mature learners engaging in third level education in Ireland is increasing and public policy continues to encourage further participation, educators’ responsibility to engage with their students in a meaningful and productive way is broadened. Government and organisational policy needs not only concern itself with increasing access for mature learners, but also with the learning experience being provided and the pedagogical situation created. This study used a mixed methods approach to gain an insight into the experience of mature learners at five institutes of technology in Ireland. The interpretive phenomenological approach seeks to place their lived experience at the centre of the research and the philosophical framework is based on the idea of the educational process being part of a transformative experience for mature learners, many of whom are at a transitional phase in their lives. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is traced through the narratives of mature learners and insights into the degree to which education can be transformational are presented. This research is intended to improve understanding of mature learner experiences and give an appreciation of the effect that individual and situational differences have on the learning experience. The way in which mature learners are categorised is considered and the extent to which mature learners who are returning to education for purely vocational reasons can be converted to engagement with lifelong learning is examined. A number of recommendations are made which are intended to improve the learning experience for mature learners with a view to improving their personal outcomes and those of society more widely.

**1.0 Introduction**

**1.1 Introduction**

Regardless of philosophical stance, either the neoliberal notion of education for purely vocational reasons, or the belief that education is an end in itself, there appears to be consensus among academics and policy makers that increased engagement in lifelong learning is beneficial for both society and the individuals who engage in it. As such, governments at national and European level have formulated policies to try to increase the number of mature learners engaging in further and higher education. However, there is a danger that focusing solely on increasing numbers will do little to improve the experience of mature learners. “There is the implicit danger that if mature students are perceived as objects of government policies, the central issue of their pedagogical experiences in colleges may not be given due consideration” (Kelly, 2004: 46). This research was undertaken to increase understanding of the lived experience of mature learners at five institutes of technology in Ireland. As a practitioner in this sector I wanted to explore their experiences with a view to better understanding their needs and expectations in the hope of becoming a more effective lecturer as a result and potentially impacting future higher education policy in Ireland.

**1.2 Rationale and scope**

The intention was to discover what *was* rather than what *might have been*. However, there were a number of observations from my role as a lecturer which prompted this investigation. Having lectured mature learners on both full and part time courses, I had observed what I perceived to be differences between the experiences of the learner based on the mode of delivery. Often mature learners in full time education appear to struggle to integrate with their school leaver classmates and also struggle when it comes to completing group work as they tend to have more difficulty in terms of work/life balance than the younger students. While part time mature learners face the same difficulty in terms of work/life balance they appear to integrate better with their classmates and this can provide a real support to their academic efforts. Participants were categorised according their classification of themselves as having full or part time status, and the notion that the mode of delivery may affect their experience was explored. Therefore the research gathered and reported the experience of mature learners and then stratified these experiences according to mode of delivery to firstly report the experiences of mature learners in Irish IoTs and secondly to determine whether the mode of delivery impacted on that experience.

Much of the current literature explores mature learners across a broad range of educational institutions and sectors, but a search for literature which was specifically focused on full and part time mature learners in the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector in Ireland yielded no results. Thus I was confident that this research would be integral to creating new knowledge to try to address this omission.

The three main aims of this research are firstly, to contribute to the body of research in the field of mature learner experiences at IoTs and more specifically to determine if the mode of delivery affects that experience; secondly to inform my own practice as an educator in the sector and thirdly to influence policy at a national level, particularly with regard to supporting mature learner in education and training at Irish IoTs.

**1.3 Chapter outline**

Chapter one introduces the research field and provides the context within which the research was undertaken. Firstly the manner in which educational qualifications are awarded is discussed and the national framework of qualifications is introduced. Secondly, the structures of the higher education sector in Ireland, with particular emphasis on the changing landscape of the institute of technology (IoT) sector, are explored. The higher education sector in Ireland is undergoing significant transformation during a time severe financial difficulty. The IoT sector in particular is facing great uncertainty as the pressure mounts to increase the quality and quantity or research that it is currently engaged in, while still providing higher education to underrepresented cohorts in society. Historically the IoT sector has focused on vocational education and building strong links with industry at a regional level, while the university sector provided education for the professions and the liberal arts at a small number of national campuses. As the boundaries have become blurred between the two a new entity, the technological university, is now also on the horizon. The way in which higher education is organised in Ireland, and the human capital approach to education which appears to be at the fore of governmental policy is explored and conclusions have been drawn as to what functions the IoT sector should retain and the potential usefulness of introducing a new tier in the sector is discussed.

Chapter two explores the existing body of knowledge related to mature learners. There are three main areas of focus. Firstly, educational policy in relation to mature learners at the institutional, Irish and European levels is explored. The extent to which mature learners are facilitated and the degree of focus on lifelong learning at each of the participating institutes is examined. The governmental policies at national and European level are reviewed with a view to determining the level of commitment there is at a policy level to increasing participation among non-traditional students. Secondly, it examines the reasons why students return to education in their adult lives and some of the aspects that affect their decision to pursue higher education. The question as to whether education for mature learners is purely vocational or part of a more holistic self-development is explored. Thirdly the literature related to andragogy is examined with particular reference to Lindeman and Knowles, two of the most notable advocates for mature learners of the last century. Following this, seminal educational theorists are discussed namely Dewey and Mezirow and various aspects of their individual theories are presented with an emphasis on the aspects of their writings that have influenced my philosophy of education. Finally, in this chapter the literature related to mature learner experience is surveyed. A vast amount of literature focuses on this topic and the volume of work reviewed here is a brief snapshot, however, the main themes that have emerged from the broader review of the literature are presented.

Chapter three examines the methodological approach for the research. The theoretical framework provides the research context and the rationale and justification for the use of mixed methods. Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology, which focuses on experience as opposed to what is consciously known, is established as being the most suitable philosophy for this research. In addition, the work of Jung is presented as being of particular interest for this research topic given his strong focus on the concept of education as a tool through which individuals can migrate from their adult selves to their true selves. Arguments for and criticisms of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a method are examined; and a justification for the use of this method is offered. The assumptions made and the ethical considerations that impacted this research are discussed. I seek to be transparent about my presuppositions in an effort to try to separate these from the research, with a view to providing an honest and true representation of the participants’ actual experience rather than the expected experience. Strategies of inquiry and analysis are presented for both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research.

This research employed mixed methods; firstly an online questionnaire which sought to capture a broad overview of the experiences of the mature learner population (*n=8,944*) was distributed and also served as a means of recruiting willing participants for semi-structured interviews (*n=10*). Two students from each institute, some full and some part time, were interviewed and their narratives used to develop themes and generate new knowledge about this cohort.

Chapter four presents the findings from the primary research. In keeping with the IPA method, minimal analysis takes place in this chapter as it is intended to allow the voices of the participants to be heard in their raw form. This chapter effectively becomes a window through which we can observe their experiences with only the meaning that they have attributed to them altering them in any way. Some of the findings, particularly related to external barriers for mature learners, corroborate the existing literature and therefore cannot be considered ‘new’ but they are included because the volume of students who reported them and the emphasis that individual participants placed on them was very significant. Furthermore they give context to the new knowledge which has been found which is explored in the fifth chapter.

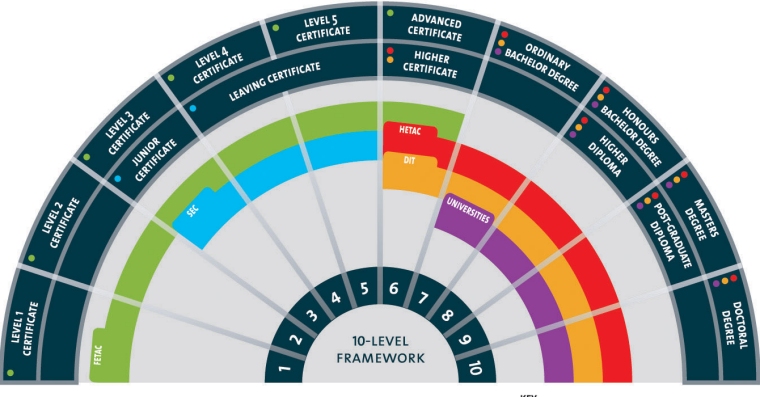
Chapter five facilitates the analysis of the findings from the primary research within the context of the existing knowledge and the philosophical framework, and presents the new knowledge that has been created. There are four unique aspects of this research that are the focus of the discussion. Firstly, the transformative aspect of education is traced through the narratives of the mature learners and the degree to which the ten phases of Mezirow’s theory fit the interviewees is determined. Findings from additional hindsight interviews that were undertaken with a number of the interviewees (*n=4*), when the learners themselves had had more time for critical reflection are included, to further test the significance of Mezirow’s theory to this cohort. Secondly, the positive and negative aspects of the lived experience of the mature learners at the participating institutes of technology are explored. Thirdly the significance or otherwise of the mode of delivery, namely a full or part time programme, on the lived experience of mature learners is examined. Fourthly, the way in which mature learners are categorised is critiqued and I seek to advance the categories of mature learners presented by Osborne et al. (2004). The specific attributes of mature learners who attend institutes of technology are examined and the extent to which students who return to education for vocational reasons can be converted to lifelong learners is considered.

Chapter six draws conclusions from the various aspects of the research including the literature, the methodology, the findings and the discussion. These conclusions are then used to make a number of recommendations which I believe will improve the experience of mature learners in Irish institutes of technology. Furthermore the ways in which these recommendations can be implemented in a cost neutral way or with minimal budgetary implications are outlined. Finally, the areas for further investigation that have emerged as a result of this research are specified.

**1.4 National framework of qualifications: further and higher education**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established in November 2012 to take responsibility for ensuring quality and consistency of educational qualifications in Ireland. The body amalgamated a number of previous awarding bodies including, the National Qualification Authority of Ireland, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Council (HETAC) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). QQI is responsible for validating educational programmes and the awards that will be granted to learners.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Figure 1, below) illustrates the various levels of award that are available in Ireland. “The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) provides a way to compare qualifications and to ensure that they are quality assured and recognised at home and abroad” (National Framework of Qualifications, 2014). The figure below shows which awarding body prior to QQI that was responsible for awarding the qualification. Secondary education in Ireland culminates with the Leaving Certificate award which is at levels 4 and 5 on the NFQ. For the purpose of this research the term further education is taken to mean education at level 5 or higher which previously was under the remit of FETAC, and the term higher education is taken to mean education at levels 5 through 10 which was previously under the remit of HETAC, the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) and the national universities.



**Figure 1: National framework of qualifications**

**1.5 Structure of higher education in Ireland**

Currently there are thirty nine higher education institutions receiving public funding which amounts to over €1.5 billion annually and services approximately 200,000 students.

“Higher education in Ireland is provided mainly by seven universities, fourteen institutes of technology, including Dublin Institute of Technology and seven colleges of education. In addition, a number of other third level institutions provide specialist education in such fields as art and design, medicine, business studies, rural development, theology, music and law.”

(Department of Education and Skills, 2014)

Of the fourteen IoTs currently operating in Ireland, thirteen are represented by Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI). There are three institutes in the greater Dublin region and the other eleven are located throughout the country. The regional access that they offer to higher education is one of the important aspects that differentiate the IoTs from universities on a very practical level. However, they also serve an important role in providing education at level 6 on the NFQ in addition to education at levels 7 through 10 that the universities also provide. Historically, the higher levels of education (levels 8 through 10) were only exclusively awarded by the university sector. Furthermore the focus of the institutes of technology has been on providing education and training for the economic, technological and commercial needs of the regions in which they are based. The mission statements of Athlone Institute of Technology and Waterford Institute of Technology reflect this fact. “The principal aim of the institute is to provide education and training for the economic, technological, scientific, commercial, industrial, social and cultural development of the state, with particular reference to the midlands” (Athlone Institute of Technology, 2014) and “The institute also contributes to the economic, cultural, scientific and technological development of Waterford City, its region and Ireland as a whole” (Waterford Institute of Technology, 2014). The HEA state that IoTs are stronger than universities in terms of part-time and flexible provision and also have a larger proportion of mature and disadvantaged entrants and are significantly involved in industry support and regional development. As such, IoTs have long been closely aligned to the human capital aspect of education, and have provided access to those in society who traditionally have had greatest difficulty in entering higher education. This is one of the greatest strengths that IoTs have relative to the universities.

The Universities Act, 1997 outlines the objectives and functions of a university and the governing authorities in each university are required to ensure that the university meets their obligations as outlined in the act and that strategic development plans are being implemented. Academic freedom of the universities and respect for the diverse traditions and institutional autonomy of each university is preserved in the legislative framework. The Institutes of Technology Act, 2006 provides greater institutional autonomy, improved governance and a statutory guarantee of academic freedom for the IoTs. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has an overseeing role in terms of strategic development and quality assurance procedures. The General Scheme of the Technological Universities Bill introduced in 2014 by Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn T.D., paves the way for the establishment of Technological Universities for institutes of technologies that have established partnerships and wish to merge.

This step was taken as part of the reform of the higher education sector that is being advocated in the *National Strategy for Higher Education* report which sets out the vision of Irish higher education to 2030. In February 2012, the HEA published a document entitled, *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape* that outlined the rationale for structural change in the Irish higher education system. It states that “the national policy of broadly distributing provision to facilitate regional access took precedence over the creation of focussed centres of excellence, as evidenced in the wide distribution of programmes such as nursing, apprenticeship and teacher education” (HEA, 2012:3). Ruairí Quinn T.D. outlined four outcomes for higher education reform that he wanted to achieve. Firstly a strengthening of the university system; secondly, consolidation, strengthening and evolution of the institute of technology sector; thirdly, achieving mass through consolidation, collaboration and the development of regional clusters; and finally, releasing the capacity and increasing the sustainability of the system (Higher Education Authority, 2013: 5). The strategy is intended to ultimately result in a smaller number of larger institutions which have diverse but complimentary missions. It is envisaged that the amalgamation and increased co-operation between the various IoTs will reduce duplication and allow institutes to co-operate to solve common problems, and achieve scale that is more in line with international norms. This is based on the supposition that “increasing institution size… can increase the flexibility that is needed to generate and to allocate resources” (2013:10). Economically the arguments are sound, and the desire to create better universities who can produce internationally renowned research is admirable, but within the IT sector the regional focus that is at the core is proving difficult to overcome. Recently Waterford Institute of Technology announced that they were going to withdraw from negotiations with Carlow Institute of Technology in relation to a bid for technological-university status (Irish Times, 2014), but they were advised in no uncertain terms that an application for technological university status would not be entertained from a single institution which forced them to agree to mediation talks with Carlow.

In terms of this research, the dynamic nature of the sector is evident given that when the idea was initially conceived the participating institutions were selected based on a historical strategic alliance they had together. However, at the conclusion of the research there three of the participating institutions, Sligo, Letterkenny and Galway-Mayo Institutes have formed the Connaught-Ulster Alliance and are committed to developing “significant and meaningful collaboration on a comprehensive range of activities”(Higher Education Authority, 2013: 25); and have declared their intention to seek technological university status at a future date. Dundalk IT and Athlone IT have declared their intention to retain IT status but to develop close links with universities in their regions; Dundalk with Dublin City University and Athlone with the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

**1.6 Human capital basis for education in Ireland**

The current trend towards instant gratification in all aspects of society has not overlooked education. Increasingly there is a need for educational institutions to justify their activities and prove their worth in the market. As outlined previously, the HEA which is the external body responsible for monitoring the quality of third level education in Ireland is also responsible for the allocation of budgets. Arguably the two functions are inextricably linked; that is to say higher education institutions are required to demonstrate their contribution to individuals and society in order to secure further funding. Governments and international agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) are encouraging a value-for-money approach in educational institutions. “Universities are being transformed increasingly into powerful consumer-oriented corporate networks, whose public interest values have been seriously challenged” (Rutherford, 2005 in Lynch, 2006). Biesta (2009) argues that the measurement of educational outcomes needs to be used with caution and that international comparison reports which often inform governmental policy tell us little about inputs to the education system and that a blame and shame policy is not necessarily one that is useful in identifying ways in which education can be improved. Furthermore, he argues that there should be ongoing discussion about what the ends of education, particularly public education actually are. Policy makers are making decisions about higher education in Ireland without meaningful consultation with the academics that are teaching and researching in the organisations they are planning to reform. The decisions related to higher education in Ireland appear to be immersed in concerns about the economic impact of such decisions as opposed to the educational impact.

The role of the university to protect free thought and knowledge generation is being squeezed out by neo-liberal market values. Privatisation of public services and increased quality control and bench marketing are seen as central to the future of education provision (McNamara & O’Hara, 2008). “The strong market forces have made higher education institutions re-orient themselves to be more sensitive to market needs” (Zhao, 2010: 66). As a society we need to evaluate what we want from further education and try to temper this corporatisation of all our institutions with recognition of the intrinsic value of higher education institutions as centres of learning. While some of this marketization is explicit there is also a growing trend in industry reports from bodies like Forfás which link education and industry and seek to increase performance, productivity and efficiency in higher education (Lynch, 2006).

Institutes of technology are now expected to engage in externally funded research projects, an objective that was previously exclusively the remit of universities. Many institutes of technology are developing ways of further aligning themselves with the private sector and throwing off the shackles of the public sector. Innovation centres and campus entrepreneurship are now the expectation rather than the exception. However, this type of activity overlooks the more holistic approach to education which does not necessarily have to produce a graduate who is solely focussed on generating profit. The expectation is that every programme must feed into some revenue stream rather than offering the opportunity for exploration of ideologies and philosophies. Without doubt this focus is a product of wider society where regard for culture, history and the arts is declining and all things economic and financial are the flavour of the day. This is further compounded by the fact that while education “is a set of processes and outcomes that are defined qualitatively…it could be judged unfortunately that the quantitative aspects of education have become the main focus of attention in recent years for policy makers” (Education for All, 2005: 28-29).

Research conducted by Cucchiara et al (2011) in Philadelphia examined the impact of increasing marketization of the education system. They found that public participation and collective forms of action were reduced as marketization increased and warn that policy makers must be aware of and try to compensate for the reduced engagement that was observed. The authors advocate developing strategies to increase transparency and encourage public input to try to reverse this trend if marketization is to continue.

Privatisation of public costs may appeal to tax payers who have little interest in subsidising the education of their fellow citizens; however, the wider societal cost of privatisation is easily overlooked by the monetarists. Where would this privatisation stop? Should health and welfare also be privatised? Whatever one’s stance there is little doubt that the “ethical principles and priorities of the business sector are not synonymous with those of a public interest body, such as a university” (Lynch, 2006: 7).

In its report to the Minster for Education and Skills in 2013 the HEA outlines the expectations of the higher education system.

“The government wishes to develop a coherent and sustainable system of higher education to meet the economics and social needs of the country, within its broad ambition to create an export-driven knowledge economy. Its aim is to underpin this ambition with a higher education system that can equip our people with the knowledge and skills necessary to live fulfilled and rewarding lives, and to meet the social and economic challenges we face as a country.” (HEA, 2013: 4)

While a need for reform of the university sector is acknowledge by the Department of Education and Skills, they believe that “the challenges of scale and the rationale for change in the institutes of technology are more immediate” (Department of Education and Skills, 2011: 101). The first change they refer to is not related to student experience or educational attainment, but rather to creating “a stronger link between student numbers and funding allocations” (2011: 101). This explicit requirement to rationalise the economic structure of the education system is foremost to the secondary issues that are outlined in relation to introducing reform with a view to meeting national strategic objectives “relating to participation, access, quality and research and development” (2011:101). It appears that one of the most important aspects of structural reform is to create greater efficiency within the sector rather than improving the quality of teaching or the educational experience of students. The HEA state that the consolidation that is proposed in the IT sector is not intended to undermine the “distinctive career and enterprise focussed mission of institutions in this (IoT) sector” (Higher Education Authority, 2013: 10).

The stance that has been adopted by the HEA appears to be influenced by global trends that they acknowledge in their reports; “around the world, higher education is becoming ‘massified’…countries are investing in research and innovation as they strive to enhance their human capital and development capacity” (Higher Education Authority, 2013: 6). Clearly the HEA believe that mass education globally is focused on creating and enhancing human capital and it appears that they have accepted this philosophy as being suitable for the Irish higher education system. In tandem with improved human capital there is also an aspiration to ensure that Ireland is producing research which is internationally regarded. There is much reference in the available reports to the aspiration to improve Ireland’s research output. “A greater emphasis on the prioritisation and the impact of our research investment is needed in future together with closer links between the research, knowledge transfer and innovation agendas” (Higher Education Authority, 2012: 3). Encouraging specialisation of the universities, technological universities and institutes of technology should, in theory, increase the quality and quantity of the research output. “Ireland is a small player in the world of research in higher education institutions and we must be focussed and strategic to maximise our return from research investment and to fully engage in international research activity….” (Higher Education Authority, 2012: 3). This focus on research is somewhat at odds with the vocational and enterprise focus approach that is the norm in the IoT sector. Historically the university sector was responsible for generating research output and the IoT sector was responsible for producing skilled graduates. Somewhere along the way the roles of each sector became blurred as IoTs began to award qualifications at levels previously reserved for award by universities. It seems that the plans outlined for higher education for the future are aiming to clarify those boundaries again in a bid to ensure that Ireland has a skilled workforce and world class research capacity.

Aristotle believed that educating the head without educating the heart was no education at all, however, the vocational aspect of education is the most important aspect of education for many of the students who attend IoTs, especially those who have attended in recent years due to redundancy and a need to reskill in order to provide for themselves and their families. For individuals who are located in rural Ireland who do not have local access to universities the IoTs offer the opportunity to achieve an education, but not necessarily the type of education that opponents of the human capital theory would advocate. All types of education cannot be provided in every educational institute. The higher education landscape in Ireland is quite clear; the IoTs primary focus is on providing education that improves employability of graduates above all else. Any reform that would increase the quality and amount of research being undertaken in the sector or that is intended to increase access to less vocational forms of education, should not replace the current form of IoT education, but rather enhance it.

**1.7 Conclusion**

The entire higher education sector is in transition, but the scope for change at the IoT level is particularly great. While no technological universities have yet been established it will be interesting to see how they actually impact education in Ireland once founded. There is a danger that giving institutions different titles will do little to improve research output or gain a greater share of international research funding, particularly if they are not given sufficient resources with which to work. More importantly, it is unlikely to do anything to improve the educational experience of their students.

It is important that the IoTs specifically do not lose their capacity to continue to provide flexible delivery of courses to cohorts who are generally underrepresented. Encouragingly the number of mature learners who are entering the IoT sector is increasing and it is important to encourage and support this trend. Furthermore it is important that the sector provides education that will improve the employability of people who return to education for vocational reasons. This is in keeping with the qualification function of education, whereby individual can improve their knowledge, skills and judgement.

The focus of the IoT sector on the vocational and enterprise functions of education is important to note in terms of understanding the context in which the learners who participated in this research have been educated. The focus on producing ‘employable’ graduates is not new in the IoT sector and as such, it would appear logical that the marketization aspect of education would be best focussed in the IoT sector, where strong links with industry, particularly at regional level has always formed part of their remit. However, it is important that this specialization and focus on human capital production is countered by a university sector that is properly supported to facilitate education in areas such as the liberal arts which are not naturally aligned to the human capital approach to education. While it would not be practical to replicate liberal arts courses that are being provided by university in the IoT sector, the opportunity exists to create a learning environment in which the fulfilment and empowerment of students can be achieved in tandem with vocational learning outcomes. Education as an end in itself and education as a means through which vocational skills can be gained need not be mutually exclusive.

My philosophy of education is very much influenced by Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, whereby education has the ability to transform individuals. In addition the assertion that education is an end in itself is wholeheartedly embraced. Having been privileged with the opportunity to pursue education I endeavour to facilitate others in their pursuit; and am hopeful that this research will improve understanding of the experience of mature learners with a view to improving that experience and increasing participation rates.

*“You can never be overdressed, or overeducated.”* Oscar Wilde

**2.0 Literature Review**

**2.1 Introduction**

This literature review is intended to provide a summary of the current state of knowledge related to mature learners experience and follows a preliminary literature review which explored the subject of mature learners more broadly. The literature is examined in the context of my current position as a lecturer of traditional (school leaver) and mature learners in an Irish higher education institution and a doctoral student of education and leadership. There are five main themes explored including education policy related to mature learners, existing theories as to why mature learners return to education, adult learning theory (andragogy) and other relevant educational theories, and finally the experience of mature learners in higher education.

Government policy at national and European level is concerned with increasing the levels of participation among non-traditional students, particularly mature learners. By improving access to higher education for underrepresented cohorts it is assumed that human capital will increase and the economy will benefit from more productive employees. The Irish government is aiming to achieve a society in which every person of working age will have access to lifelong learning. However, some concern exists in the academic community as to whether education for employability alone is desirable, but acknowledges it is perhaps the most obvious reason for education during a time of fiscal consolidation and bleak economic outlook. What can be agreed upon is that education should be viewed as an investment rather than a cost when determining policy. Exploring this theme helped to provide an understanding of the factors that are affecting higher education provision for mature learners currently, and also provides an understanding of the limitations and opportunities for new initiatives in increasing mature learner participation rates.

The second theme explored is the process that mature learners undergo when deciding to participate in higher education. The positive and negative factors that influence their decisions are examined and particular emphasis is placed on the intrinsic barriers faced. Thirdly, the theories of adult learning are explored with a focus on the works of Lindeman and Knowles who are seminal to the subject of mature learners. The situational differences that can make learning more complicated for mature learners are outlined and the problems associated with one size fits all solutions for complicated social problems are addressed.

The works of Dewey and Mezirow are presented throughout the fourth theme, educational theory. Dewey’s contention that education should not be purely vocational, but an end in itself, and his understanding of how teaching and learning occur are reviewed; and Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, and the ten phases that it involves, is examined and the extent to which education alters learners’ meaning schema is explored.

Finally, the experience of mature learners as reported in the existing literature is presented and a determination as to what type of supports can help to ensure a successful outcome for these learners is made.

Primarily the research has been focused on Irish and British educational journals and government sources so as to try to include literature that was most relevant to the population that was explored during the primary research phase of this research. Additional literature which provides the European context was largely gleaned from policy documents and reports issued by the European Commission. This focus is intended to minimise the cultural differences that may account for differences in experience for mature learners in other parts of the world.

The majority of the literature accessed has been published since the turn of this century but some seminal sources from earlier dates are included. The themes that emerged from the literature review informed the content of the online questionnaire and the question schedule for the mature learner interviews. The literature review formed part of the overall research plan and was integral to ensuring that there was coherence between existing literature, the primary research and the new knowledge and theory generation.

**2.2 Policy issues**

In recent decades there has been a movement towards promoting higher education and making it accessible to a greater number of potential students especially non-traditional students. 1996 was heralded as the 'The European Year of Lifelong Learning’ (Europa, 1996) and since then Slowey (2010) observes that much of the expansion in higher education since 1990 has actually occurred outside of the universities in institutions like further education colleges, polytechnics and community colleges. Also she notes that “mature students are more likely to be found on part-time, distance, post-experience and non-credit programs” (Slowey, 2010:1). The *Towards 2016* document published by the Department of the Taoiseach commits to increasing access for mature and disadvantaged students to further and higher level education with a view to improving employability for people of working age and meeting the needs of young adults (18-29). In order to achieve the vision of ensuring that people of working age have “sufficient income and opportunity to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life” the government and social partners commit to working towards a country where “every person of working age would have access to lifelong learning” with a view to progression towards higher education (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006: 49). Rowland (2012) argues that “degree education of the masses becomes primarily a means to acquire skills for employment” (2012: 7) and this can in turn lead to a devaluation of the humanities and the characterisation of further education institutions as profit-making. Her suggestion is that often what we refer to as education is the school system rather than the activity in its widest sense. Whereas the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) acknowledges and embraces the power of education more broadly, as one of the most important factors in achieving peace, poverty eradication, lasting development and intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2014). Bowl advocates adult educators being allowed to “engage with individuals and communities for the purpose of social action as well as individual accreditation and employability” (Bowl, 2014: 4) but identifies the difficulty that fiscal constraints have placed on this sector and the fact that government funding tends to be targeted towards learners that will reach “prescribed and accredited levels of attainment” (2014: 125).

**2.2.1 European higher education policy**

Across Europe and now even further afield The Bologna Process is a process of reform of the higher-education agenda in participating countries. “A recent Eurobarometer Survey among students in higher education shows that students want wider access to higher education and that universities should open up to cooperation with the world of work and to lifelong learning.” (European Commission, 2009: 1). While many of the institutions providing further education in Ireland have signed up to the Bologna Process there needs to be a concerted effort at every level to ensure that lifelong learning is promoted and encouraged. 13.5% of full time, undergraduate new entrants into Irish higher education institutions for the academic year 2009-10 were mature students but this fell short of the 17% target that had been aspired (HEA, 2010: 18). Ireland has higher levels of participation in education than the OECD and EU averages for students up to the ending age of compulsory education and also in the 15-19 years range. However, when it comes to those engaged in education beyond the age of twenty, Ireland drops significantly below the OECD and EU averages and perhaps more worrying drops lower as the age profile of the student increases. In Ireland only 0.2% of the population aged forty or over is engaged in full or part time education compared with and OECD average of 1.5% and an EU average of 1.3% (OECD, 2011: 303).

Androulla Vassiliou the European Commisioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, outlined in the 2013 Education and Training Monitor document that budget constraints tend to put spending on education in the spotlight but advises that “it is precisely in such times that growth-enhancing policies, such as education, should be a top priority: spending on education is an investment, not a cost” (European Commission, 2013: 3). The European Commission is currently developing and seeking input into its new European Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE) which will provide a platform where teachers, trainers, volunteers, policy makers, researchers and academics who are engaged in adult learning can network, engage and exchange good practice. This is described as being “the latest development in the EU’s long-term commitment to promoting high quality adult learning in Europe” (European Commission, 2014a: 1). The commission is currently working with thirty two countries to implement the European Agenda for Adult Learning which advocates increased participation in adult learning of all kinds, whether it be to improve employability for active citizenship or for personal development and fulfilment. Despite this commitment to lifelong learning at the European Commission the “participation of adults in learning varies significantly between EU countries: from 1.4% to 31.6% (2012 figures), and the overall trend is that numbers are stagnating” (European Commission, 2014b: 1). The Education and Training Montior 2013 indicates that “progress in adult learning is lagging far behind the EU’s commitment” (2013: 66), the report finds an annual decrease of 1.1% in the adult participation rate in lifelong learning which is very much at odds with the annual increase of 4.4% required to meet the 2020 target.

Layer (2011) argues that education policy in the United Kingdom needs to acknowledge the fact that one in four first time undergraduates are a mature student. He believes the government should have policy funding regimes that are based on the reality of life for all students rather than focussing on the vision of the first-time student as an eighteen year old school leaver. In Ireland, following a year on year decrease in the number of 25-64 year olds attaining tertiary education from 1997 until 2000, an annual increase has occurred from 2000 to 2009 (OECD, 2011: 41). Ireland needs to ensure that the increase in adult education is not just focussed on the younger portion of this cohort but is in fact targeting and providing access for older mature learners also.

**2.2.2 Irish higher education policy and lifelong learning**

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 states that the “capacity of higher education has doubled over the past twenty years and will have to double again over the next twenty” which clearly indicates higher levels of participation currently and expected (Department of Education & Skills, 2011b: 6). The strategy identifies the importance of the experience of students in first year and argues that first year curricula should be designed to not only provide foundation in subjects for subsequent years but also serve to engender employability and lifelong learning outcomes (Johnston, 2010 cited in Department of Education & Skills, 2011a: 56). The report supports the use of flexible learning delivery including the provision of full and part time courses, classroom-based, blended, online and accelerated learning (Department of Education & Skills, 2011a: 54) based on the expectation that the bulk of the increase in demand for higher education will come from mature students with the number of school leavers only increasing slightly (2011a: 44). The report acknowledges that Ireland’s performance in lifelong learning has been undermined by the difficulties of the funding system for higher education. Despite the funding difficulties, when benchmarked against OECD systems, the Irish system in 2011 was delivering above average outcomes at funding levels that are slightly below average (2011a: 110).

The Irish governmental tone had changed significantly with the publication of the National Recovery Plan 2011-2016. The national recovery plan does not make any reference to mature students or lifelong learning and suggests that costs in education will be reduced through an increase in the student contribution costs for third level education (Department of Finance, 2011: 12). In fact, the report advises that the “25-34 year old age cohort in Ireland has a higher level of formal qualification than the OECD average, while the proportion of the population aged 20-24 with at least an upper second-level education is the highest in the EU15” (2011: 23). While these are proud achievements for the country, it does not eradicate the need to ensure that mature students are facilitated at higher level and encouraged to avail of further education in order to improve the quality of the country’s human capital, especially if our knowledge economy is expected to be the main driver for economic recovery. In the same year the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) indicated that the recent economic downturn had magnified the importance of lifelong learning and workforce development. This lack of consistency between governmental departments illustrates the extreme difficulty in trying to establish a comprehensive education policy that will facilitate mature students in Irish higher education.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) which is the statutory planning and policy development body for higher education in Ireland states that their role “is to create a higher education system that maximises opportunities and ensures a high quality experience for students” (Higher Education Authority, 2014a). They state that the student should be at the centre of all activity to ensure that the education system can deliver on its individual, social and economic responsibilities. While this is very encouraging in terms of ensuring that all students in higher education in Ireland have a positive experience, it is difficult to ascertain how this is realised on the ground. Their performance evaluation framework profiles Irish higher education institutions on the following criteria: student numbers, disciplinary mix, participation, internationalisation, teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, staff, financial and space. It is heartening to see that participation is a key performance indicator with focus on mature entrants, entrants with disability and entrants from non-manual, semi and unskilled socioeconomic backgrounds. An Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) is a system wide pilot which was completed by a consortium including student, higher education institutions, the HEA and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (Higher Education Authority, 2014b). This was the first report of its kind which seeks to capture an understanding of student experience nationally.

Ireland demonstrates very low levels of adult participation in higher education relative to countries like Sweden and the United States where adult participation rates are highest (Schuetze & Slowey, 2003). Morgan and Slowey (2009) note that opportunities for students at the two ends of the age spectrum are limited in Ireland, this includes pre-school children and mature or part-time learners in higher education. Further education in Ireland faces an ongoing challenge posed by the restrictive fiscal position but an emphasis needs to remain on providing access to students at either end of the spectrum. Lifelong learning needs to be embraced by institutes providing further education and practical supports need to be put in place to facilitate the mature learner. The HEA suggests that Irish higher education is at a point of transition particularly as “unemployment and changing patterns of work bring new urgency and a much greater emphasis on lifelong learning and upskilling” (Higher Education Authority, 2011: 4). The importance of mature learners in the overall structure and culture of the organisations where they study needs to be understood and acknowledged. “There is the implicit danger that if mature students are perceived as objects of government policies, the central issue of their pedagogical experiences in colleges may not be given due consideration” (Kelly, 2004: 46). Woodrow (cited in Bowl, 2001: 157) stresses the “need to examine systematic and institutional factors which act to exclude certain sections of the population”, that is to say we must seek out policy, administrative, social or cultural issues that are limiting the access of mature learners.

The HEA acknowledge Ireland’s relatively poor performance in the area of lifelong learning and position this shortcoming in the context of an environment where there is a need to “enhance human capital” given that “the requirement for upgrading and changing of employee skills and competencies is becoming even greater” (Higher Education Authority, 2011: 11). It believes that higher education needs to engage more directly with the up skilling challenges presented by the recent economic downturn and is central to helping ensure the adaptability of the Irish workforce to technological and social change (2011: 36). Only 12% of undergraduate provision was available part-time in 2007-08 which reflects the “current unresponsiveness of Irish higher education to the skills needs of adults in the population” (2011: 48).

The purpose of education needs to be considered when generating policy and Biesta (2009) suggest there are three purposes that should be considered, namely, qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Qualification is the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding and provides the rationale for state funded education (2009: 40). Socialisation is how we become part of the social and political world and is part of how we can improve our network social capital and maintain traditions and cultures. Finally the subjectification function allows the individual to flourish and helps to establish new ways of being independent of the social context in which they exist. In this regard, the educational policy for the IoT sector appears to focus almost exclusively on the qualification purpose of education. The language of the policy documents focus on skills and knowledge which relate closely to this purpose. This is at odds with the social justice motivation for lifelong learning where adult learning was seen as a process of empowerment and emancipation. The policy documents appear to position lifelong learning as a process through which economic growth and competitiveness can be achieved. Citizens are seen an engines of economic growth and education in one way in which their maximum performance can be achieved.

Arguably this is not therefore lifelong learning in the way that it was intended; Knapper and Cropley (2000) argue that lifelong education and lifelong learning are often confused and the lifelong learning is intended to be a process whereby the individual learns how to learn from all aspects of their lives, not just their education. It moves beyond the cognitive aspect of education and focuses on features such as motivation, values, attitudes and self-image which can improve a person’s readiness to learn. This definition of lifelong learning is closer to my view of what higher education should provide, but for the purpose of this research, lifelong learning is taken to mean on-going learning as an adult that takes place in an educational context; which is a definition in keeping with the policy documents that relate to this research.

**2.2.3 Facilitation of mature students by the participating institutes**

It would appear that some of the institutes that are participating in this study are making a concerted effort to reach adult learners and to facilitate their learning in a flexible and supportive environment. At the Institute of Technology, Sligo, objective two within priority one of the current strategic plan for the institute is to “increase the percentage of adult learners and international students” (Institute of Technology, Sligo, 2009: 10). The institute aspired to achieve 10% annual growth on the 2008 figures by December 2012. In addition IT Sligo’s Learning, Teaching & Assessment Strategy demonstrates an awareness of some of the main challenges faced by a changing student body. Aim 2 of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment: Aims and Objectives is to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body including increased awareness of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, addressing issues that may disable learners, acknowledging various levels of experience and learning styles of learners and ensuring the location does not disadvantage learners, and addressing the barriers posed for learners by family and caring responsibilities (Institute of Technology, Sligo, 2010: 3).

The Galway Mayo Institute of Technology outlines its aim to “meet the national target for participation in higher education with particular reference to life-long learning and under-represented cohorts” in objective three within the community engagement section of their strategic plan (Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, 2010: 14). Their mission statement clearly communicates a commitment to developing life-long learning opportunities and the number of mature learners as a proportion of the overall student body is reflective of this.

Athlone Institute of Technology list paying a catalytic role in the economic, social, cultural and environmental development of the region as one of their four main strategic priorities for the period 2009-2013. Within this priority the institute pledges to assist in skills development in the region through increased access for lifelong learning and access for non-traditional students (Athlone Institute of Technology, 2009: 19). The REACH project (Regional Assistive Technology Connection to Higher Education) led by Athlone Institute of Technology was identified as an example of good practice in relation to advancing the access agenda for lifelong learners (HEA, 2010: 12).

Dundalk Institute of Technology established a Centre for Lifelong Learning in 2001 which is listed in their strategic plan as part of their commitment to provide access opportunities for mature students to accredited and non-accredited programmes on a part-time basis (Dundalk Institute of Technology, 2006: 39). The strategic plan for 2011-2016 outlined the need to increase flexibility and recognition of prior learning for lifelong learners and a commitment to improve skills of “the workforce” but there is no mention of the Centre for Lifelong Learning (Dundalk Institute of Technology, 2011: 14).

Mature or lifelong learners are not specifically mentioned in the current strategic plan for Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

As the number of institutes of technology seeking technological university designation increases it is important to ensure that their involvement in further adult education is not diminished. The IoTs and vocational educational committees (VECs) play an extremely important role in providing NFQ level 6 and 7 qualifications and other occupational training (SIPTU, 2011: 1; Marginson, 2011; National Strategy for Higher Education, 2011).

**2.3 Theories related to mature students’ decision to return to education**

Often the motivation of the mature learner can be very different from that of the school leaver. Woodley & Wilson (2002) examine the non-work benefits associated with achieving a degree for mature students who often state that they are not studying for career reasons. They identified a range of factors from increased self-confidence to better health that were recognised by mature learners as benefits they sought through further education.

Research undertaken by Brooks (2005) found that when queried about the age difference between students in further education, many respondents thought “chronological age was less useful than work experience in explaining differences between students” (2005: 61). In addition there was a very strong stereotype which indicated that adolescent learners would have less responsible and independent attitudes to learning, whereas older learners were perceived as self-motivated and strongly committed to their studies (2005: 59). This may indicate, therefore, a weakness in the way in which we classify our students, as age is currently the only factor that determines whether or not a student falls into the category of a mature learner.

It is important to consider the decision making process that the mature student undertakes when deciding to pursue further education, as their deliberations are likely to provide the individual psychological context in which they interpret their experience as a mature learner. Osborne et al (2004) examined how mature students weigh up the advantages and disadvantages associated with higher education. Both negative and positive factors associated with the pursuit of further education are acknowledged and considered by the potential student. The students are categorised according to their main motivation for returning to education.

The *delayed traditional* student is one who is similar to the traditional school leaver, normally in their twenties and is similar in terms of their interests and level of commitment to the traditional school leaver. The *late starter* category includes students who have undergone a life-transforming event such as divorce and require a ‘new start’ in life. The *single parent* category comprises predominantly women who have a family to support financially, socially and emotionally. They face the dilemma that their engagement in further education, which is often perceived as a way to improve their family’s future, in the short-term, is likely to impact negatively on their children. The *careerists* are those who are currently in employment but seek qualification to progress their existing careers. The *escapees* are those who are currently in employment but seek a way out of what they perceive to be ‘dead end’ jobs. Finally, the *personal growers* are those who are pursuing education purely for its own sake and who undertake further education for their own personal enjoyment or fulfilment. (Osborne et al, 2004: 296) Table 1 illustrates the positive and negative factors that affect each category and we see that the factors for each of the categories are not mutually exclusive, many of the expectations, positive and negative, exist regardless of the overriding motivation for considering further education.

**Table 1: Positive and negative influences upon the decision to become a mature student.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Negative factors influencing decision to become a student** | **Categories of mature student** | **Positive factors influencing decision to become a student** |
| * Fear of debt * No confidence due to old attitudes, school experience – ‘not for me’ * Unwelcoming institutions * Worries re juggling job/study | **Delayed traditional** | * Interest in the subject to be studied * Long-term requirement to be equipped for career * Time to settle down * Parental support for some |
| * Some financial concerns * Lack of confidence – ‘can I cope?’ * Attitudes of family/social group | **Late starter** | * Cathartic experience as stimulus * Current opportunity – ‘time for me’ * Self belief – ‘If they can do it so can I’ * Altruism |
| * Lack of self-belief * Financial ‘Catch 22’ * Timetable difficulties * Childcare problems * Juggling family, work, study | **Single parent** | * Need a good job to support family * Want to be a role model for family * Enjoy learning |
| * Need to work so time for study limited * Family pressures – never at home | **Careerist** | * Better long-term career prospects * Self-respect * Interest in studies * Employer support and sometimes requirement |
| * Lack of confidence * Costs difficult to manage * Need to work as well as study * Timetable issues * Doubts about job market when finished | **Escapees** | * New career with better prospects * Better pay * Need a change in direction – stuck in a rut |
| * Lack of confidence | **Personal growers** | * Interest in the subject * Opportunity presents itself now * Prove that I can do it |

(Osborne et al, 2004: 296)

It is important to consider the negative factors that potential students perceive as they are likely to impact on how they perceive the actual experience of further education. For example if the potential student has foreseen a large number of negative factors associated with their further education, but experience relatively few in reality, then it is likely that they would classify their experience of further education as positive. However, if they underestimate the negative factors and overestimate the positive, they are more likely to have what they perceive to be a negative experience. This ideological stance is expressed eloquently by Knowles 1978 (cited in James, 1995) who believes that “adult learners do not bring their experience with them to higher education; they *are* their experience”. It was important to always be aware of the role that the student’s previous experiences and expectations have on their reported experience which is the focus of this study. Phillips (1986) ascertained that “all mature students anticipated encountering more problems adapting to higher education of an academic nature prior to their studies than were actually experienced whilst females anticipated more problems than males but experienced fewer” (1986: 289).

Finemann (cited in Phillips, 1986) argues that “educational institutions provided an appropriate base for redundant white collar workers seeking new opportunities” (1986: 291). While this rather crude view of the educational institute as a base for redundant workers was originally voiced in 1983 it still rings true today. As a result of the significant increase in unemployment in Ireland since 2007, student places allocated to those on unemployment schemes have been oversubscribed. The correlation between increasing unemployment and increasing student numbers, particularly in the IoT sector, lends credence to Finemann’s argument. This research explored whether or not mature students who undertake further education as a reaction to redundancy or unemployment are representative of mature students more generally, but from this study it cannot be conclusively determined. In the pilot study undertaken in 2012, it appeared that that is not the case given that none of the respondents had returned to education for these reasons. However, given that they were final year students, it must be acknowledged that their decision to return to education was made during a more economically favourable period.

During the main study, conducted in 2013, the motivation to return to education was often associated with the desire to find work, or to find more suitable work. This is perhaps symptomatic of a changing culture of employment, there are fewer ‘jobs for life’ and there is a need for individuals to engage in lifelong learning to ensure that they are well positioned for new roles in the future. Historically the mature learner may have had the opportunity of an education for education’s sake, but for many mature learners now there is a vocational void that needs to be filled. Traditionally education tended to be frontloaded in childhood and very early adulthood as preparation for the career that would lie ahead; one of the general principles of human capital theory (Phillips, 1986: 292). Nowadays however the labour market has destabilised and redundancy can force individuals who would otherwise not have engaged in education into higher education courses. The traditional route for working class teenagers of an apprenticeship followed by a steady skilled career path has been eroded and there is increased transient employment and intermittent unemployment (Marks, 1999: 158). Pilcher (1995) argues that “mature students are physical evidence of life-course destabilisation” (cited in Marks, 1999: 158) and she argues that mature students have the worst of both worlds having to deal with this destabilisation while being thrust into the role of an undergraduate, a position they believe to be reserved solely for the young.

Thankfully in the nearly twenty years since Pilcher expressed these views there has been a shift in terms of how further and higher education is perceived and concerted efforts have and are being made to encourage wider participation, however, it would be naïve to think that this might not still be the reality for some mature learners. One would assume that if a student is studying for purely vocational reasons i.e. to skill or retrain to achieve employment, they may be less likely to expect a positive experience if they feel they ‘have to’ rather than are ‘choosing to’ engage in education. Further education still has its critics and some would argue that “the whole notion of the need for, and benefits of, life-long learning is a false political doctrine, designed to serve the economic competitiveness of the country and prop up an impoverished higher education sector” (Edwards, 1993, cited in Penketh & Goddard, 2008: 316).

Biesta (2006: 169) documented the “shift towards understanding the point and purpose of lifelong learning primarily in economic terms and far less in relation to the personal and the democratic function of lifelong learning”, and suggests that this has meant many lifelong learners have had to relinquish control over their own agenda for learning. This resonates particularly in this research, given that many of the participants reported having returned to education for the purpose of improving their employability. Globalisation and mobility of human capital means that many governments are facing the same challenges in relation to creating and maintaining a knowledgeable labour force which can improve the productive capacity of their nations. It is likely that this has contributed to the shift Biesta describes, but it is also responsible for increasing opportunities to access education in some cases. While Biesta argues that the shift has resulted in lifelong learning becoming a duty rather than a right, I believe that the right did not exist for many people previously and while it may be becoming more like a duty in some circumstances, it has also provided access to education for people who previously never had that opportunity. While there is no doubt that higher or further education is not appropriate or indeed desirable for everybody or every career, what is desirable is universal opportunity to engage in further education should the individual so decide.

Some existing research would validate and almost encourage the apprehension that mature learners have regarding undertaking further education, as there is a body of work that suggests that eyesight, balance, reaction speed and strength all deteriorate from the mid-twenties onwards, which would suggest an uphill struggle for the mature learner relative to the school leaver. However, there is little evidence that any of these potential deficiencies will actually impact on the performance of mature learners in further education. Berger (1998) argues that “variation in intelligence and cognitive ability does not matter a great deal until 65 or older” (cited in Muir et al, 2007: 118), thus minimising the impact that any of the previously mentioned deficiencies are likely to have on performance. In addition it is important to acknowledge that “there is a tendency for social skills and strategic thinking to improve with age” (Collis et al, 2000 cited in Muir et al, 2007:118) thus providing the mature learner with an advantage over their school leaver classmates.

**2.4 Andragogy**

Andragogy is the “art and science of helping adults to learn” (Henschke, 2011: 34). The term was first coined by Alexander Kapp in 1833 and was made most famous by adult learning theorist Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s, but much of the true development of the concept occurred during the 1920s. At that time two distinct streams within this theory of adult learning emerged, the scientific stream and the artistic stream. Post world war one the scientific stream lead by Edward Thorndike examined whether or not adults were actually capable of learning. By the 1940s “adult educators had scientific evidence that adults could learn” (Knowles et al., 2011: 36) due to the work of Thorndike and Sorenson in particular. Simultaneously Eduard Lindeman who was strongly influenced by the writings of John Dewey focused on the process of adult learning and sought to understand how adults learn. He firmly believed that adult education was a process that leads to adults becoming aware of their experience and themselves and he placed self-fulfilment as a focal point around which adult learners operate. Lindeman suggested that educators should be more focussed on how adults were learning rather than what they were learning. His work was based on five key assumptions about adult learners and these assumptions form the foundations for virtually all subsequent adult learning theory.

**Table 2: Summary of Lindeman’s key assumptions about adult learners**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Assumption 1 | Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy. |
| Assumption 2 | Adults’ orientation to learning is life-centred. |
| Assumption 3 | Experience is the richest source for adult’s learning. |
| Assumption 4 | Adults have a deep need to be self-directing. |
| Assumption 5 | Individual differences among people increase with age. |

(Knowles et al., 2011: 38)

Knowles advanced Lindeman’s work in the 1970s and acknowledged that adult learners are “self-direct and autonomous and that the teacher is a facilitator of learning rather than presenter of content” (Henschke, 2011: 34). There has been much criticism of Knowles’ work one of the most compelling was Jarvis (1984) who contended that there was insufficient empirical research to justify a complete acceptance of this theory. Jarvis is justified in his criticism to the extent that we cannot completely accept Knowles’ theory as fact given that it has not been scientifically tested. Henschke (2011) hopes that someday andragogy will be established as a scientific academic discipline, whether or not this can or will happen remains to be seen. One can assume that like any other educational theorist, Knowles was trying to present a theory which could be applied to a particular human population, the reality is that there is no one size fits all explanation of mature or adult learners as all learners are coming to education from their own individual and unique contexts.

Recognising this difficulty with the theory, Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) advanced the theory to include three dimensions of andragogy in practice. Using the core adult learning principles initially advanced by Knowles they positioned this in a framework to include individual and situational difference and the goals and purposes for learning. Thus they made the model more relevant to educational practice by acknowledging the lack of homogeneity that exists between learners’ circumstances and distinguishing between various learning situations. The model is presented and further discussed in chapter three, as it forms part of the theoretical framework through which the data analysis was conducted.

In terms of this research the major difficulty with any theory of adult education is that in practice mature learners are often not taught in isolation. The experience that the mature learner has is critical as learning and personal development are affected by the emotional context in which the student is educated. “Student success is heavily dependent on aspects of social integration which involves the affective dimensions of their engagement with higher education” (Beard et al, 2007: 236). While the traditional school leaver students certainly do not fall into the category of children in terms of educational theory, neither do they fit neatly into the category of adult learner. Typically in the IoT sector, part time programmes will be populated by all mature learners and full time programmes are normally populated by a mixture of traditional and mature learners. Therefore even if it were possible to agree on a best way to educate adult learners it might only be relevant for part time courses that do not facilitate school leavers. Lammers & Murphy (2002, cited in Hockings et al (2007) report that while there is innovation in teaching methods in higher education the lecture is still the dominant pedagogy and while the authors acknowledge it is an efficient method of delivering knowledge to large numbers it is ineffective in terms of exploring knowledge and experiences, which are of great importance when dealing with mature learners.

This highlights the importance of the educational practitioner being aware of the different ways in which students learn and trying to create an environment which will facilitate all learners. If one were to suppose that adult learners could not be integrated with younger classmates this would have major ramifications for how the entire further and higher education sector is structured.

**2.5 Relevant educational theories**

The educational theorists whose work was considered to be of particular relevance to this study Dewey and Mezirow are reviewed in this section and the debate around the purpose of education which was introduced earlier is further explored.

**2.5.1 Who should be educated and why?**

Education is an end in itself but it also has the capacity to improve human capital and in doing so improve the economic circumstances of individuals and nations. It would appear that the latter aspect of education is threatening the former in the sense that policy makers have become more and more conscious of the potential to improve human capital through education and this realisation is threatening the stance of education as an end in itself. National and international policies are focused on ensuring that lifelong learning is encouraged to ensure that the labour force does not become stagnant, and little regard for the empowerment and emancipatory aspects of education is shown. Although it would be preferable to have a more holistic approach to education permeate the education policies of the day, what has improved, certainly in the IoT sector in Ireland, is access to education for mature learners and this has a positive impact on society.

As many mature learners, including some of those who participated in this study, were not afforded the opportunity at an earlier stage in life, it is important to provide ease of access for this group to further and higher education so as to ensure that their capacity for intellect is developed as well as their manual or vocational abilities. Governments today who provide mass education in modern society are faced with trying to encourage individuals to participate in education that will benefit the economy and society. “Like most countries in the developed world, the lifelong learning and widening participation agenda in the UK is one that has been primarily concerned with skills-based vocational learning” (Jackson & Jamieson, 2009: 400). Furthermore, many of the mature learners in this study did explicitly express a desire to improve their employability which would validate skills based policies. However, I believe that there is a broader agenda in education than merely employability and lifelong learning should be available for all adults, including those who are currently employed, professional skilled or vocationally trained. As such, education should be available for reasons beyond improved job prospects.

It can be argued that if people are receiving a free education from the state then they should be striving to achieve an education that will allow them to give back to the very society that has provided the opportunity. The difficulty with this argument is that the total economisation of education would inevitably lead to a reduction in the study of subjects that are perceived to have little monetary value such as literature and the arts. This is the very reason why it is important to understand that education is about so much more than just the content of a syllabus. An education provides the student with an ability to reason, understanding, consider opinions beyond their own and problem solve. Perhaps the most transferrable skill of all that it imparts is confidence. Education is the vehicle through which individuals can learn how to produce knowledge and how to use it in various contexts.

While universal access to education is being advocated, this should not be perceived as a stance that would encourage everybody to participate in higher education. There are many roles in society that do not require a higher education, but are essential for the normal functioning of our society. Education, particularly in the IoT sector, also plays an important role in providing a mechanism through which people who were previously skilled can re-skill either through choice or necessity.

**2.5.2 Dewey**

The work of John Dewey is seminal to educational theory today and although his work was primarily focused on pedagogy as opposed to andragogy there are lessons that can be applied to mature learners also. He argued that the home was where a child’s curiosity is stimulated and therefore forms the initial context in which problem solving occurs through research and experimentation albeit in an unstructured fashion. He believed that educational institutions should formalise this process of inquiry (Boisvert, 1998). Thus it is reasonable to expect that Dewey would recognise the importance of the workplace as a learning ground for mature learners. Mature learners engage in the process of problem solving and experimentation not only in their home and social environment but also in their work environments. Therefore educators working with mature learners need to formalise the learning that they are undertaking every day in the same way that schools formalise the learning that children experience at home. However, mature learners should not be limited to what Dewey referred to as vocational education which is purely built around occupations, but their education should be an end in itself. Education is the vehicle through which social change can occur. Education not only affects the individual but also society and therefore it is in all our interests to ensure that adult learners are supported in their educational aspirations. “Education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience – which is always the actual life-experience of some individual” (Dewey, 1938: 89). He argued that knowledge is based on experience, but experience is not something that can be imparted from the teacher to the learner, rather it involves activity, not passive receptivity (Cooney et al, 1993). This is a particularly relevant point given that this research is focused on institutes of technology which are differentiated from universities by virtue of the fact that they tend to offer courses that are vocational in nature and normally involve practical as well as academic components.

Dewey argued that experience was gained through a process of simultaneous doing and suffering. Some participants in this research expressed frustration with peer learning as they felt it was unstructured and detracted from the real learning which occurred during lectures and practical tutorials. Others reported feeling patronised by the simulation of ‘real world’ assignments for assessment purposes. This may indicate an underestimation by lecturing staff of the mature learners’ previous experiences and ability, alternatively this could be precisely the doing and suffering that Dewey describes. He argues that the learner is acting and interacting with the world around them and intelligence is the ability to react appropriately to the environment. Knowledge and intelligence become the agents of change. By becoming adept at responding to the environment, the individual becomes capable of shaping it also. As the channel through which knowledge and intelligence are created, education therefore is the key agent for social change.

Critics argued that Dewey was advocating a kind of chaos in the classroom whereby students were encouraged to learn more about the things that interested and engaged them, rather than sticking rigidly to a defined syllabus which was working towards pre-determined outcomes. However, Dewey was not adverse to the teacher being in control of the class, but he saw their role as one of guidance; in today’s language a facilitator of learning. He rejected the concept of the student as a vessel that needed to be filled with information by the teacher, and this in turn lead to his rejection of an assessment strategy that simply rewarded those who could best remember the content of the syllabus. For Dewey the relationship between teacher and student was symbiotic, they were learning together. This concept appeals greatly to the me, and in my role as a lecturer every effort is made to ensure that students understand that the learning is reciprocal. Mutual respect is much more quickly fostered in an environment where the students know that their experience is valued and welcomed as part of the learning mix. The role of the facilitator is to ensure that the shared knowledge and experiences are relevant to the objectives of the class.

Dewey does not believe that knowledge is the key to power, rather he argues that “while all thinking results in knowledge, ultimately the value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking” (Dewey, 2004: 146). The ability to think is a true life skill, as it allows the individual to adapt to the dynamic world in which they live; knowledge itself is only useful in the right context, but the ability to think is applicable to every situation.

**2.5.3 Mezirow**

Mezirow argues that the primary medium for transformative learning is the individual experience and also what he or she experiences in the ‘classroom’ itself (Mezirow et al, 2009). Experience is also created and stimulated through reflective practice by the student and the teachers. He believes that life experience, which of course is of great relevance to mature learners, provides a deeper well from which the student can draw. This increases their ability to reflect on, and also to react to, the educational environment.

Mezirow argues that meaning that is created through learning is based on our ‘meaning schemes’ and our ‘meaning perspectives’. The meaning schemes refer to the habitual and related expectations that we have. Based on past experience we have a cause and effect expectation, for example we expect water to satisfy our thirst. Meaning perspectives are a combination of higher-order beliefs, theories, goal orientations or evaluations that we have. These are often based around familiar role relationships such as the teacher-pupil or priest-parishioner. There is a pre-existing structure of assumptions based on habitual expectations familiar to everyone (Mezirow, 1990). This forms the context in which we learn. For a mature learner who has not previously engaged in higher education their expectation of the lecturer may be closely related to their experience of a teacher-pupil relationship that they previously had. “Experience strengthens, extends, and refines our structures of meaning by reinforcing our expectations about how things are supposed to be” (1990: 4). This may help to explain the fact that findings from the pilot study for this research indicated that mature learners did not want to be central to the teaching process rather they wanted the lecturers to supply the information (Moran, 2012). This finding was completely at odds with the existing school of thought in relation to learning and is contrary to Mezirow’s suggestion that contemporary societies rely on original interpretation rather than simply accepting “any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure” (Mezirow, 1997: 5). As a practitioner, this is also at odds with my philosophy which views the role of a lecturer as a facilitator of learning rather than a provider of information.

This finding could be based on the mature learners’ meaning perspectives given that most of them would have been more familiar with rote learning and the memorization regurgitation cycle rather than problem based learning methods. In addition however, Mezirow had previously written that “to seek a consensus, we turn to those we feel are best informed, least biased, and most rational to critically assess the evidence and argument and arrive consensually at the best judgement.” (Mezirow, 1990: 10). This may help to explain why those particular participants were more interested in what their lecturer had to say rather than engaging in discussion with their peers; the lecturer may have been perceived to be the ‘least biased’ and ‘most rational’ when it came to matters on the curriculum. In this instance the search for consensus is replaced by the search to meet learning outcomes, and thus achieve educational success which compounds the notion that the lecturer would be best placed to provide the most relevant information.

The first two columns in the table below summarise the ten phases of transformative learning as outlined by Kitchenham (2008) based on Mezirow’s 1978 works. The third column has been added to suggest how these ten phases are applicable to mature learners, specifically those who participated in this research. This table has also been further advanced in the discussion section where the phases have been explored using the narrative of one of the mature learners (section 5.2.1).

**Table 3: Mezirow’s Ten Phases of Transformative Learning Applied to Mature Learners**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Phase** | **Mezirow’s Description of Phase** | **Application to Mature Learners** |
| 1 | A disorienting dilemma | Change in personal circumstances e.g. redundancy, significant birthday, government funding available |
| 2 | A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame | Regret at not having pursued education sooner, feel potential has not been filled, fear of not being adequate |
| 3 | A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions | Examination of their place in society on a personal, economic and social level |
| 4 | Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change | Relate to experience of other mature learners they may know or have observed returning to education |
| 5 | Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions | Explore the concept of being a student again, how will personal relationships be affected, how will they integrate with other students/lecturers |
| 6 | Planning a course of action | Considering finance, time management, childcare, personal relationships, travel, application process |
| 7 | Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans | Attending lectures, tutorials, self-directed learning, integrating with other students |
| 8 | Provisional trying of new roles | Applying theory in laboratory practical, computer tutorials, work experience, research, undertaking assessments/exams |
| 9 | Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships | Achieving learning outcomes, passing exams, gaining qualification, using skills in new setting e.g. workplace |
| 10 | A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective | Reassessment of oneself, reflecting back to phase one to review progress, determination as to how they and/or their circumstances have changed |

(Adapted from Kitchenham, A. 2008: 105)

**2.5.4 Alternative voices on transformative learning**

Mezirow is considered the seminal author on transformative learning, but there have been many alternative voices both advocating and refuting the concepts that he presented. For example, Cranton (2000) is an advocate for transformative learning and suggests that self-directed learning, autonomy and critical thinking help to promote transformative learning and should be used in the learning environment to facilitate transformation. Whereas, Newman (2012) rejects the concept of transformative learning and suggests that only if the person were to actually ‘change form’ could we correctly conclude that they had undergone a transformation. Instead he suggests that when Mezirow and others are advocating transformative learning, what they are actually describing is what he would term ‘good learning’. He does not believe that the change in meaning schema and a way of looking at the world is part of a process that is ‘transformational’; rather he contends that it is simply part of the learning process.

This view is rejected by Merriam (2004) who suggests that transformative learning occurs when a more developed or mature mind-set or point of view replaces a previous one. Therefore this interpretation of transformative learning implies that transformation does not require a change of form, but rather a change in how things are viewed by the individual. Mezirow was primarily focused on how adults viewed themselves and their world and therefore the process of transformative learning does not actually require any change to the person or their circumstances, rather it is about how they perceive those circumstances and their place within them.

Taylor (2008: 5) argues that “it is transformative learning theory that explains [the] learning process of constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world”. He believes that transformative learning leads to the development of a more functional frame of reference, and thus a perspective transformation. This functional frame of reference could be interpreted as what Dewey referred to when promoting the importance of improved thinking as an outcome of learning. Taylor believed that Mezirow overlooked essential aspects of the transformative process including spirituality, positionality and emancipatory learning.

Brookfield’s (1987) critical reflection theory is closely aligned to the idea advanced by Mezirow, whereby he suggest that critical reflection causes the individual to reflect on their current assumptions and in doing so can be a catalyst for change for individuals, organisations and society. He argues that those who reflect critically are more self-aware and become more sceptical about the world around them. This scepticism can result in social action where the individual considers and imagines alternatives to the current assumptions that they and society hold. Critical reflection is likely to be part of how adult learners change their meaning schema.

The psychoanalytic view of transformative learning suggests that individuation, the process of discovering one’s true self, is a fundamental part of the transformative process. “Individuation involves discovery of new talents, a sense of empowerment and confidence, a deeper understanding of one’s inner self, and a greater sense of self-responsibility”(Boyd and Meyers, 1988; Cranton, 2000; Dirkx, 2000). These aspects of transformative learning are very relevant to this research, especially given the influence of Jung’s theory of the liminal place between the adult and true self which is often crossed through an educational journey. They psychodevelopmental view of transformative learning suggests that transformation occurs across a lifespan, and while this theory may be of relevance in other contexts, it does not fit well with this research which was conducted over a relatively short timeframe.

One of the most recent developments in the area of transformative learning is the neurobiological perspective which has been advanced by Janik (2005); who used medical imaging techniques to establish that physical changes can be identified in the brain when learning is occurring. This theory suggests that learning is most effective at higher cognitive levels and is also influenced by gender. While these physiological aspects of learning are of interest to this research given that they focus on the individual as opposed to the social or cultural factors, given my inability to measure such changes, it was not of particular use when analysing the data in this research.

The various theories that have been advanced have relevance for understanding transformative learning. However, all of these theories have one aspect in common, they are seeking to improve or discredit the initial ideas presented by Mezirow. As such, his ten phase of transformational learning are still of great relevance.

**2.6 The experience of mature learners**

Adult learners must overcome a number of challenges, not all of which are exclusive to their cohort but which are commonly quoted as hurdles they experience. The most significant factors involved include “financial issues, relationships with partners… other external commitments, the support [or lack thereof] they received at college”. (Murphy and Fleming, 2000: 82). Stevens (2003) notes that students experience anxiety, guilt and shame particularly during the early part of their studentship. However, this doubt in one’s ability is common for virtually all students; “it must be a rare scholar or student who goes through his entire college course without feeling many twinges of doubt about his ability to complete it” (Cleugh, 1972: 81). Cleugh argues that it is important that tutors dealing with mature students are aware of greater stress at the beginning of the course and therefore should design assessments in the early stages with this in mind, so as to maximise the students’ confidence in the early stages. Morrison argues that “women are still often central to domestic arrangements and the coordination of family life; therefore it cannot be assumed that women have ‘private’ time to study” (Morrison, 1996 cited in Griffiths, 2002: 269). This is an important consideration in terms of how this research could lead to an improved assessment and teaching strategy for mature students. Jordan (1997) believes that “challenges arise for adult learners as the administration, resource allocation and, most importantly teaching, are primarily focused on younger students” (cited in Kelly, 2004: 47; Layer, 2011).

Shanahan (2000) argues that there is significant discrepancy between the quantitative measures of mature student success at higher education and the experiences described by them in qualitative research. She argues that despite attaining higher levels of academic achievement than their younger peers, mature learners are plagued by low levels of confidence in their academic ability. In terms of mature learner performance at higher education the literature is inconclusive, there are those who argue that mature learners are slightly more likely than younger students to fail their course (Woodley & Wilson, 1987), while others argue that mature learners are not more likely to fail and actually are more likely than younger students to complete their course (Walker, 1975; Nisbet & Welsh, 1972; Lucas & Ward, 1985; Richardson, 1994; Richardson, 1995; cited in Wilson, 1997). These findings are at add odds with Schofield & Dismore who write that there is “much evidence… that mature students show a higher dropout rate than those under the age of 21” (Schofield & Dismore, 2010: 209) meaning that even when mature students do return to education they are more likely than their younger peers to leave again without qualifying.

Murphy and Fleming (2000) state that people involved in the access movement in the United Kingdom believe that higher education often reinforces rather than reduces social inequality and they argue that universities inhibit the participation of adults. Such low levels of confidence and perceived or real barriers to entry to further education make it all the more difficult to undertake further study as a mature learners.

Stevens (2003) explores the influence that participation in higher education can have on the self and its identities. He argues that the “self is not *given*, participants have to continually attribute to themselves particular characteristics” (2003: 237). He believes that understanding this process can help us to understand why some mature students struggle and eventually withdraw. A better understanding of the experience of students who return to education should also help to ensure that policies and support systems can be put in place to maximise the level of success and benefit of higher education for these students. Ramsay et al (2007: 249) suggest that there are four main types of support that are required namely, emotional, practical, informational and social companionship. Some of these supports are likely to come from the student’s own social sphere particularly the emotional and social, but the practical and informational supports most likely need to come from their educational institution.

By creating a more positive learning experience for the mature learner a better overall outcome could potentially be achieved. In order to maximise the learning experience the tutor must be aware of the difference between the way in which mature students and traditional students learn. Kelly argues that the mature learner is more “orientated towards deep learning” and that “learning which is based around the memorizing-regurgitation cycle does not appeal to them” (Kelly, 2004: 51). However, a very practical challenge then exists for the lecturer or tutor who must deliver a module to a group of students who comprise both traditional and mature students. As most of the part time courses run at IoTs in Ireland comprise all mature students, but full time courses tend to comprise a mix of both, perhaps the positive learning experience is diminished for full time mature students if the tutor is trying to facilitate both traditional and mature learners in the one lecture or tutorial.

Furthermore, the concept of experience itself is extremely subjective which makes it difficult to generalise and as a result it is difficult to formulate policy that will improve mature learner experience for everybody in the cohort. Not only do we have to consider subjectivity when we are examining student experience but it is “in turn linked to the teaching and learning strategies, pedagogic methods, learning resources and how effectively these are deployed” (Committee of University Chairs, 2006: 28). All of these factors are likely to vary from one lecturer to the next not to mention between educational institutions.

**2.7 Conclusion**

Having reviewed the existing educational policy documents from Irish and European sources it appears that while there is a commitment to improving lifelong learning at national and European level, the participation rates are lagging behind target. While greater participation is welcomed, there is a fear that the neoliberal philosophy that appears to underpin many of these policies could hinder or damage the cultural and social aspects of education.

Slowey’s finding that mature learners were more likely to be found on part-time and distance learning courses being provided by further education colleges, polytechnics and community colleges compounds the need for an examination of the institute of technology sector specifically; as it is the link between further education in community colleges and higher education in the university sector. It was expected that this research would assist in addressing the gap in the knowledge related to this sector that was evident.

The review of the literature suggests that it is widely accepted that the experience of the mature learner varies significantly from the school leaver student. Mature learners face higher levels of uncertainty around their ability to succeed, which is somewhat unusual given that they tend to perform better than their school leaver counterparts. Many mature learners are aware of the positive benefits of attending higher education, but this is coupled with a variety of barriers that they face including financial difficulties, time management issues and concerns about how to achieve work/life balance. These themes that emerged from the literature formed the foundation of this research which sought to explore whether these issues that are commonly reported as being of concern to mature learners were evident for learners in the IoT sector. Furthermore the research sought to determine whether or not full or part time course delivery would affect the extent to which these barriers were experienced.

Lindeman’s key assumptions about adult learners and the andragogy theory advanced by Knowles et al. were applied to this research; the former particularly during the conclusions and recommendations phase and the latter in relation to providing context for this research as outlined in the following chapter. The educational theorists Dewey and Mezirow were used to inform my philosophy of education and provide the basis on which my understanding of what education is, and should be, for mature learners is based. Various transformational theorists such as Taylor, Cranton, Newman and Janik have been reviewed and the relevance of their theories to this research established. In particular the work of Mezirow has been used to determine the extent to which the mature learner experiences that were reported in this research validate or counter the ten phases of transformative learning that he suggests occur.

**3.0 Methodology**

**3.1 Introduction**

As the title indicates, this research was conducted using a mixed methods approach, this is defined by Creswell and Clark (2011) as a study that includes at least one quantitative strand and one qualitative strand. A more elaborate definition is offered by Johnson et al (2007) who acknowledge the different interpretations of mixed methods that exist; be it a mixing of methods or types or research, the place in the research process in which the mixing occurs, the scope of the mixing and the rationale for using mixed methods. “Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference tech­niques) for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson et al, 2007: 123). While the question under investigation relates to human experience and therefore initially appears to most naturally lend itself to qualitative methods, in order to try to establish an overview of the broader trends in the mature learner population, quantitative methods were also employed. The use of mixed methods is perhaps reflective of my own varied areas of interest; given my qualification as an economist but my vocation as an educator.

In order to explore the experience of mature learners attending the institutes of technology involved in the study, and to try and establish whether or not the attendance of a full time or part time programme affects their experience, quantitative methods were used. However, qualitative methods were required to try to understand the individual experiences of some of the mature learners who participated in the research. The mixed methods approach is intended to facilitate triangulation of the results, with a view to increasing the validity of the findings and allowing greater potential for theory generation following data analysis. The andragogy in practice model presented by Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) gives context to this research which is based on a pragmatic approach as outlined by Creswell (2009). The philosophical framework is primarily based on the theories of Carl Jung, with reference to Dewey and Mezirow, as the educational experience is part of an overall transformation of the individual.

Fenstermacher contends that “consideration of the student has all but disappeared from… contemporary discussion about education” (Fenstermacher, 2006: 97). This study places the student firmly at the centre of the investigation and their reported experience forms the basis for this phenomenological research. Dewey argues that actual life-experience is the cornerstone of education which will benefit individuals and society (Dewey, 1938,) thus reiterating the importance of placing lived experience at the centre of this research.

Firstly in this chapter a critique of mixed methods research is undertaken and the rationale for using mixed methods is advanced. Following that the philosophical underpinnings of the research are presented and the use of a phenomenological stance is defended. Each of the four phases of the primary research including the pilot study, the online survey, the semi-structured interviews and the hindsight interviews that were conducted are then presented.

**3.2 Mixed methods research**

As outlined previously the use of mixed methods is intended to increase the validity of the findings from this research by providing triangulation. Using quantitative method allowed data be gathered from the population of mature learners at the participating IoTs and facilitated the analysis of the data to provide an overview of the issues that mature learners are facing in this sector. The qualitative method facilitated deeper investigation into the experience of ten willing participants. Creswell and Clark (2011: 61) caution that mixed methods should only be undertaken when there is specific reason to do so; as this research was investigating a topic in a sector that to date has been underrepresented in the literature I believed mixed methods were required. The combination of breadth and depth of data appealed most to me as a researcher and was, in my opinion, the best way to improve understanding of mature learner experience in the IoT sector. It was necessary to employ qualitative techniques to understand the experience of mature learners, but quantitative data was required to try to determine if the mode of delivery had an effect on that experience.

**3.2.1 Mixed methods and mixed paradigms**

Greene (2007) outlined six possible stances that existing literature documents in relation to mixing methods and mixing paradigms. She cautions that the list of six is not exhaustive and that each stance is not necessarily independent from one another. Firstly, the purist stance suggests that it is not possible to mix paradigms in the same study and that the interconnected philosophical assumptions that are integral to each paradigm should be respected. Secondly, the a-paradigmatic stance suggests that philosophical assumptions related to ontology, epistemology or methodology are logically independent and therefore can be mixed and matched in various combinations. For this stance the focus is on the context and problem at hand rather than an abstract philosophical paradigm. Thirdly, the substantive theory stance suggests that paradigms may be embedded or intertwined with substantive theories and substantive issues and conceptual theories related to the study are of more importance than the philosophical paradigms in and of themselves. Fourthly, the complementary strengths stance suggests that because the assumptions of different paradigms are different in important ways, methods implemented within different paradigms should be kept separate from one another so as to maintain methodological integrity. Fifthly, the dialectic stance suggests that paradigms differ in important ways, but that paradigms themselves are historical and social constructions and therefore are not sacrosanct. As such, the tension created by juxtaposing different paradigms can help to achieve discovering of reframed or new understanding. Finally, the alternative paradigms stance suggests that “historical incommensurabilities” among paradigms can be reconciled through new, emergent paradigms such as contemporary pragmatism, or transformation-emancipation. Therefore what should guide mixed method practice, along with contextual and theoretical demands, is a new paradigm that actively embraces and promotes the mixing of methods (Greene, 2007: 68).

This research was undertaken with the stance that both paradigms and methods can be mixed in order to ensure that the phenomenon under investigation can be reported in a manner that places the findings of the research and the possible theories that can be generated to the fore. As qualitative and quantitative methods both have positive and negative components it was envisaged that combining both allows for the positive aspects to be maximised and the negative aspect to be minimised. That is to say, for example, that the individual context of qualitative data can be enhanced by measuring the extent to which such data is replicated throughout a larger sample. This allows the data to be both broad and deep, and assists with generating theory that is based on personal but not individual experiences. While the experiences that were investigated in this research were reported by individuals, and are accepted as being personal to those who live them, similarities and themes were drawn by virtue of the fact that many of the experiences reported were broadly similar to others that were reported by other members of the sample.

**3.2.2 Application of mixed methods to this research**

Both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were applied to this research and while “quantitative research may be mostly used for testing theory, it can also be used for exploring an area and generating hypotheses and theory” (Blaxter et al, 2002: 65), therefore the purpose of using both methodologies was to enrich the study. While the use of a quantitative methodology may initially seem inappropriate (juxtaposed to the hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy that pervades this research) it is believed it did in fact enhance the findings of the investigation. Mixed methods approaches are often advocated by the pragmatists who suggest that “qualitative and quantitative research should not be seen as competing and contradictory, but should instead be viewed as complementary strategies appropriate to different types of research question” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2006: 15).

The recommendations that are made in this research are based on the evidence that was gathered from both methods, but it is believed that the triangulation of data has improved the usefulness of the recommendations in practice as they are based on evidence from both the qualitative semi-structured interviews and also the broader quantitative data that was gathered from the online survey. That is to say that recommendations and conclusions were not made on the reported experience of one learner but rather on themes that emerged from both data sets. This addresses the difficulty that Bryman (2007: 8) suggests exists in combining qualitative and quantitative methods whereby often both methods are conducted but the two data sets tend not to be “genuinely integrated”. Using mixed methods was intended to corroborate and enhance findings but using more than one method (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998: 13), but for this research, mixed methods represents not only a function of the research but is also appropriate for the theoretical perspective. While the research is not best described by the transformative-emancipatory paradigm which advocates the use of mixed methods for social justice, there are aspects of the research that reflect this paradigm in so far as many of the participants reported not having had the opportunity to pursue education at an earlier stage in life, and the suggestion that accessibility to higher education should be improved for mature learners is advanced.

It was envisaged that the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods would increase the validity of the research. The focus however has always been clear; the qualitative data from the interview phase were paramount. The sequence of implementation of the research was however the reverse; as the online survey was initially sent to gather the quantitative data and also identify willing participants for the subsequent interview phase. The findings from the qualitative and quantitative aspects of this research were broadly similar which made it easier to integrate the findings and present them in a combined fashion; this was fortunate as Tashakkori & Teddlie warn that “particular problems may develop when the results are discrepant, and the novice and/or solo investigator may be unable to interpret and/or resolve these inconsistencies in order to make meta-inferences” (1998: 21). While this research does not, and could not, make meta-inferences about mature learners, theory generation was undertaken and suggestions as to how the experience of mature learners in Irish IoTs could be improved have been advanced.

Two typologies of reasons for mixing methods are outlined by Creswell and Clark (2011: 62) based on the work of Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989) and Bryman (2006) and the reasons for using mixed methods vary from triangulation to improved credibility and utility. The application of mixed methods in this research provided triangulation by gathering data through more than one method, and it also improved the credibility of the individual learner experiences that were reported. Finally the mixed methods approach improved utility (Bryman, 2006) by making the findings more useful to me as a practitioner and it is hoped for other practitioners and policy makers in the sector.

**3.3 The theoretical framework**

The study assumed a phenomenological approach as the primary research was intended to give an understanding of the meaning that studying as a mature student has for the participants. Through the process of phenomenological research “the researcher brackets or sets aside his or her own experiences in order to understand those of the participants in the study” (Nieswiadomy, 1993 cited in Creswell, 2009: 13). Having said that, it is important to acknowledge the futility of the researcher trying to distance themselves entirely from their cultural, educational and professional background, instead it is important to ascertain a philosophical framework that best fits the research and thus helps reduce bias as much as possible, while staying true to their beliefs and ideology.

**3.3.1 Phenomenology**

While J.H. Lambert coined the term phenomenology, it is more often associated with Husserl and Heidegger, each of whom advocated their own type of phenomenology. Flood (2010: 17) contends that phenomenology is both a “philosophic attitude and a research approach”. Husserl’s philosophies gave rise to the descriptive phenomenological approach to research, whereas Heidegger’s philosophies are associated with the interpretive phenomenological approach. Primarily Heidegger’s main interest was ontology; the study of being. It is this interpretive or hermeneutic approach that has been applied to this research. The hermeneutic approach is more concerned with the exploration of the lived experience or ‘dasein’ rather than people or phenomena, it is concerned with ‘being’ in the world (Haim, 1999; Flood, 2010). Heidegger sought to illuminate the ordinary through his brand of phenomenology. He was interested in seemingly ordinary things; lived experiences that occur somewhere between birth and death. Van Manen (1990) reiterates this when he states that “lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research… [it] is the breathing of meaning” (1990: 36). Arguably there is no type of experience other than lived experience, but as this term is common throughout the phenomenological texts that have been used to inform this research it has been adopted for this research and is intended to refer to the way in which mature learners ‘have been’ during or ‘lived through’ their experience.

Heidegger has been strongly criticised for his support of Nazism, and some writers would suggest that his theories should not be used or studied as a result (Steiner, 2000; Carlin 2009) however, the researcher chooses to separate his political sympathies from his philosophical contributions as his theories offer a philosophical perspective that is particularly suited to this research. Heidegger understood the importance of teaching and learning and perhaps most appealing to the researcher; he understood the difficulty of teaching, not a greater need for knowledge on a subject matter, but facilitating the student in their learning, to let them learn. “The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than – learning” (Heidegger, 1968: 15).

Much of the difficulty in using a phenomenological approach for this research was trying to find the arm of phenomenology that was most suited. There are many shades of phenomenology and finding the right gradation on the spectrum was important. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with what people experience rather than what they consciously know (Flood, 2010). “In the proper philosophical sense, [it] is the letting be seen of what at first and for the most part does not show itself but has to be brought out of concealment” (Haim, 1999: 351). This research sought to reveal the ‘dasein’ of the participants, asking them to share their experience and verbalise the feelings that normally remain concealed in their minds. A hermeneutic framework provided the researcher with a process for listening to the story of the mature learners, to deconstruct those stories and to then explore emerging themes.

Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen as the methodology through which the lived experience of the participants would be considered. This branch of phenomenology places emphasis on the interpretative nature of the process by which we create meaning in our lives. The subjectivity of the interpreter is acknowledged and it does not seek to assume that there is one final interpretation which is correct. Unlike the physical world there is no single truth when exploring social phenomena.

In fact, the semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for inter-subjective interpretation between the interviewer and the interviewee. Normal conversational patterns mean we tend to reinforce what we are hearing by asking further questions which seek to confirm for us what we believe to be the meaning; however, this can appear like a leading question when isolated from the rest of a transcript. Similarly the researcher can agree with what an interviewee is telling us as a way of reassuring them that they are doing well in the interview and thus hoping to elicit their continued co-operation. None of this is conscious but it is normal behaviour during a conversation.

The following extract from the transcript of the interview with Betty\* demonstrates this.

Carol: *Did you ever feel that you were missing out that you weren’t there enough for your son or did you have any of those concerns?*

Betty: *Well no… I always made the time for him… he came first in my life and then I put anything else around it…*

Carol: *Yeah… you got your priorities right…*

Betty: *I’ve got my priorities right… I’ve no choice… I get the call at night time*.

The first question when examined in isolation may appear leading. The question was asking if the interviewee experienced guilt about not being there for her son, a more generic question would be “do you have any concerns?” Furthermore when Betty responded I affirmed her response by saying “you got your priorities right”, the learner then repeated the phrase as though to reassure herself and validate not only her response but also the topic that she was reflecting on.

However, when this section of transcript is viewed in context (Appendix G) it is clear that it formed part of a conversation around the broader question of general concerns the student experienced. The topic of her son, specifically, was included because the literature suggests that for many mature learners this is a concern that they experience. The analysis of the data that is gleaned from an interview is a combination of the lived experience of the participant and my subjectivity. It is the flexibility of IPA that allows the researcher to acknowledge this input rather than trying to remove themselves entirely from the process. However, it is probably also the greatest weakness of this method. Larkin et al (2006: 103) warn that “it is easy for flexibility to be mistaken for lack of rigour”. The use of mixed methods in this research helps to guard against this weakness as data was also collected via the online survey which is an impersonal collection method that significantly limits researcher input when respondents are constructing their responses. Furthermore the input of the critical friend helped to ensure that researcher bias was limited.

There are two aims associated with IPA, firstly, the researcher must try to understand the participant’s world and describe it and secondly, they then develop a more overt interpretation related to the wider social, cultural and theoretical context (Larkin, 2006). These aims have been embedded in this thesis by including a separate findings section (4.0) which represents the reported world and/or experience of that world by the participants and a discussion section (5.0) which seeks to use interpretative analysis to position the initial findings in the wider context. Yet even the findings section is subject to some interpretation, as it is virtually impossible to describe something without adding an interpretation at the same time (Pringle et al, 2011; Finlay, 2011). Therefore minimal interpretation is included to avoid simply subjecting the reader to a list of quotations. In addition, IPA is “idiographic in its commitment to analyse each case in a corpus in detail” (Smith, 2011), therefore the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim manually to ensure thorough analysis on a case by case basis, in addition to the broader analysis that was undertaken using NVivo10™.

**3.3.2 Philosophical worldviews and the andragogy model**

Creswell (2009) suggests that there are four philosophical worldviews (see Table 4) and that under the pragmatic worldview “instead of focusing on methods, researchers emphasize the research problem and use all approaches available to understand the problem” (2009: 10). This worldview appeals to this researcher as it assumes that research always occurs in social, historical, political and other contexts. The data are not collected in a vacuum but rather are influenced by everything that is around them. Furthermore the pragmatist is more concerned with providing the best understanding of the research question rather than the application of traditional structured qualitative or quantitative methods of inquiry. Also, the pragmatist does not view the world as an absolute unity therefore mixed methods can be blended and moulded simply to find the best fit to meet the needs and purpose of the research. Perhaps the most appealing facet of this philosophy is the belief that “truth is what works at the time” (2009: 11), therefore universal truths do not have to be hypothesised and then proved or disproved. However, the constructivism worldview is also relevant for this research, particularly the qualitative aspects, as it involves the investigation of phenomena “formed through participants and their subjective views” (Creswell & Clark, 2011: 40). This approach forms understanding from the bottom up by understanding individual perspectives and shaping them into broad patterns.

**Table 4: Four worldviews**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Post Positivism** | **Constructivism** |
| * Determination * Reductionism * Empirical observation & measurement * Theory verification | * Understanding * Multiple participant meanings * Social and historical construction * Theory generation |
| **Advocacy/Participatory** | **Pragmatism** |
| * Political * Empowerment issue-oriented * Collaborative * Change-oriented | * Consequences of actions * Problem-centred * Pluralistic * Real-world practice oriented |

(Creswell, 2009: 6)

The andragogy in practice model presented by Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) was identified as a suitable model in which to position this research and give it context. This model identifies three different dimensions of andragogy in practice including, (1) Goals and purpose for learning, (2) Individual and situational differences and (3) Andragogy: core adult learning principles (Knowles et al., 2011: 146).

This second point in this model is of particular relevance to this study as the individual differences can refer to each unique experience that the participants report, and the situational differences can refer to whether they are attending their course on a full or part time basis. The goals and purpose for learning and the core adult learning principles were explored during the analysis of the qualitative data. This research is intended to add new knowledge to the understanding of individual goals and purposes for learning and to improve the understanding of the effect that individual and situational differences have on the learning experience.

**Figure 2: Andragogy in Practice (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998)**

**Goals and Purposes for Learning**

**Individual and Situational Differences**

**Andragogy:**

**Core Adult Learning Principles**

1. **Learner’s need to know**

Why

What

How

1. **Self-concept of the learner**

Autonomous

Self-directing

1. **Prior Experience of the learner**

Resource

Mental models

1. **Readiness to learn**

Life related

Developmental task

1. **Orientation to learning**

Problem centred

Contextual

1. **Motivation to learn**

Intrinsic value

Personal payoff

**Institutional growth**

**Societal growth**

**Subject matter differences**

**Situational differences**

**Individual learner differences**

**Individual growth**

Adapted from Knowles et al, 2011: 147

**3.3.3 Philosophical perspective**

The educational theorists that were explored in the literature review, Dewey and Mezirow advanced very interesting and relevant theories in relation to education. However, the journey into the philosophical field resulted in the decision to use the philosophies advanced by Carl Jung primarily as the philosophical perspective through which this research was analysed. More commonly associated with psychoanalysis and analytical psychology Jungian philosophy may not be an obvious choice for a doctoral research in education. A significant body of research already exists related to mature learners, but most commonly data is analysed using educational philosophies. Therefore it was hoped that the use of a framework normally associated with psychology would offer a new perspective on the topic. Furthermore, the study of education itself does not exist without people, therefore the concept of the individual and self cannot be separated from educational research. Specifically Jung is of interest when studying mature learners who often experience difficult emotions when embarking on further education. Education forms part of a personal transformation for many mature learners and the research indicates that for many they hope that it will be a turning point in their lives; this is precisely why Jung’s theory is of relevance to this research.

Jung believed that there were two distinct life stages involved in the development of oneself. Childhood does not permit the development of a self-identity as the child is too closely aligned to the psychic space of the parents to develop an ego. The first half of life is involved in separating from the parents by acquiring an adult identity which often involves forming relationships or producing children. He argued that the development of oneself as a social being during this period often is achieved through further education, developing a career and establishing a way of life (Casement, 2001: 148). Jung believed that the transitional period between the two phases occurs at around forty years of age for a man and a little earlier for a woman and was often associated with depression or anxiety; which would indicate that it is a difficult time in which to dwell. Casement argues that in her work as a therapist she often encountered people who described feelings of ‘being stuck’ which she believes represented the liminal place between the two stages Jung describes. This liminal space helps to explain and give credence to the categories of mature students outlined by Osbourne et al (2004); the careerist, the single parent etc. all of whom are looking to advance to the second stage of life. Britton & Baxter argue that for all “mature students education is a key site for the construction of identity, but the meaning of education and its significance for self-identity varies” (1999: 179). Mature learners may be on the threshold of creating their true selves and education is one of the tools that can help them to achieve the transition.

While reflecting on these ideas, I was struck by the fact that I could be in this liminal space and has pursued my doctoral study as a way in which to achieve my own self actualisation. It is a strange sensation to have believed that you were conducting a study about other people only to realise that you are perhaps observing your own experience through others. This emotional involvement would be welcomed by Jung whose approach to the analytic process was “essentially a dialogue and a mutuality requiring the emotional involvement of the analyst for change to occur” (Casement, 2001: 79). This fits well with the IPA method which acknowledges the effect the researcher has on the research.

The concept of finding the true self is also found in the writings of Maslow when he discussed the strive for self-actualisation, and Rogers who wrote about the need for individuals to merge their actual self and ideal self. Existentialism is relevant in this context in so far as it is concerned with individual self-fulfilment. Sartre believed the purpose of life is a quest for individual meaning, the individual takes precedence over the crowd or pre-existing orthodox beliefs (Cooney et al, 1993: 16). This initially seems somewhat at odds with Dewey who believes, like Plato, that education and democratic society are interrelated. This research is concerned with individual experience, but it is an experience that occurs in a context that is created by democratic society i.e. the education system. This research forms a starting point from which the individual experience can be better understood in the hope of creating a better educational experience and therefore creating a better society.

Jung’s work is not always immediately associated with educational philosophy, but Semetsky (2012) argues that “his emphasis on the learning, individuating, process grounded in human experience strongly parallels John Dewey’s educational philosophy, in the framework of which all education is always already moral education devoted to human growth” (Semetsky, 2012: 1). Jung writes that there are three stages involved in our transformation: confession, explanation and education (Jung, 1933: 53) and he challenges the doctor (psychotherapist) to pass through these stages themselves as they try to help their patients to transform; “everything that happened to the patient must now happen to the doctor” (1933: 53). Thus as an educator it would be foolish of me not to use this process as part of my own transformation; by confessing, explaining and educating myself, while expecting the subjects of this study and my present and future students to do the same. This idea of education as part of a transformational process is also a central theme of the writings of Mezirow. His concept of the adult learner reframing their thinking and reassessing their structure of assumptions as they learn is closely related to this strive for finding the true self, or the second self as Jung calls it.

**3.4 Assumptions of the researcher**

My career has afforded me the experience of lecturing and assessing mature learners who attend college on both a full and part time basis. Broadly speaking I have observed that mature students who engage in part time study tend to make stronger more meaningful relationships with their classmates, while those who study full time tend to become more isolated and have difficulty in integrating into group assignments. This is the background that motivated the research but it was not intended to serve as a hypothesis or research question. Rather the research is an exploration of what experiences exist and the purpose is to record these experiences and to try to determine how this data can be interpreted, analysed and applied to result in improved professional practice, organisational support and national policy that enhances the experience of mature learners. The experiences were stratified according to how the learners classified themselves, full or part time, to try to determine if the mode of delivery affected the mature learner experience.

I consider myself an advocate for mature learners in Irish institutes of technology and seek to ensure that where possible, current and future policy should ensure that this particular student cohort have a positive and meaningful engagement with the institutes they choose to attend for further or higher education purposes. Education in and of itself is a worthwhile endeavour, but greater levels of participation can be expected if those who attend further education as mature learners have a positive experience and report it to their peers.

**3.5 Ethical considerations**

Every effort was made to ensure that the power relationship that exists between the participants and I was never used to manipulate or exploit the participants or findings. Evidence of the power distance between the students and I may have been displayed given that the response rate to the pilot research which was conducted in the department where I work was significantly higher than the response rate when the research was extended beyond the department in my own institute and to other institutes.

This research was considered to have little or no risk and participants were advised that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Also, I was committed to ensuring that bias would not be shown towards the institute in which I was employed and at no time was the data used to draw comparisons across institutes. All participating institutes were assured that the data would not be used to compare or contrast the institutes. The focus at all times was on student experience, regardless of the institute they were attending.

The plain language statement and consent were included in the e-mail that was sent to the mature learners (Appendix B). Prior to final ethical approval, the Research Ethics Committee at Dublin City University requested that a file separate to the online survey would be used to gather names and contact details for participants willing to be interviewed. However, I responded by communicating my fear that willing participants would be lost as a hyperlink could not be embedded in the survey and respondents were less likely to copy a link into their web-browser. This consideration was accepted by the committee and approval was granted for the survey to be conducted in its original format (Appendix F).

In order to achieve a greater protection against bias and increase the validity of the findings, I asked a critical friend Dr. Áine Finan, Clinical Psychologist with the Health Services Executive to review the data and ensure that the analysis, findings or any inferences that were made had been made solely on the data as it was found and were not subject to manipulation.

All data was gathered, stored and analysed in confidence. Online data was double password protected and hardcopies of the data and analysis were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office.

**3.6 Strategies of inquiry**

The primary research was conducted during four distinct phases which followed on from the initial secondary research and resulting literature review. Phase one involved a pilot study to test the intended methods of inquiry that would be applied to phases two and three in the actual study, and to provide the opportunity to identify any errors, omission or improvements that could be applied. Phase two, consisted of an online survey which was send to all mature learners (*n=8,944*) in the five participating institutes of technology. This online survey was used to gather data from a large population which would allow for some discussion as to the general trends among full and part time mature learners. Students were asked to classify themselves as full or part time learners, and this was the basis on which they were stratified during the analysis phase. Furthermore, the online survey was the vehicle used to identify willing participants for the third phase of the research. Phase three consisted of semi-structured interviews (*n= 10*) with participants who had volunteered to take part in this phase via the online questionnaire. Phase four was not part of the original research design, however, following analysis of the qualitative data from phase three, it was determined that a number of short hindsight interviews (*n=4*) would be useful in trying to further validate the findings. These telephone interviews were conducted with a number of the original participants approximately fourteen months after the semi-structured interviews in phase three had taken place.

The discrepancy between the number of participants in the online survey and the number of participants in the semi-structured interview can be justified for two reasons; technology and the IPA method employed. The availability of online survey software means that once a survey has been designed online it is as easy to analyse responses from large numbers of respondents as it is to do so for smaller numbers. Thus by using a larger number validity can be increased without any significant additional resources being employed. As this online survey was being sent using student lists from management information systems databases, there was no additional work involved in sending the link to a large number. However, this type of scale would be totally unsuitable when using the IPA method for the interview phase which followed. The number of students used was based on the recommendation made by Finlay (2011), that three participants would be considered an ideal number using this method for Masters level research. Based on this it was deemed that any more than ten for a doctoral research would be unsuitable. Furthermore this number was in keeping with other comparable works of research that had been submitted at doctorate level to Dublin City University.

**3.6.1 Selection of institutes of technology**

Given the scope of this research it would not have been feasible to investigate all institutes of technology in Ireland, therefore the decision had to be made as to which institutes would be approached and asked to take part. I am currently employed by the Institute of Technology (IT), Sligo and had previously conducted the pilot study for this research at this institute, so it was the first obvious target. A variant of snowball sampling was used to select the other institutes as IT Sligo had a historical alliance with four other institutes of technology, Letterkenny IT, Athlone IT, Dundalk IT and Galway Mayo IT. IT Sligo was also involved in an application to the Higher Education Authority to be recognised as a technological university with two of those institutions. It was determined that these organisations were suitable institutes and likely to participate in the research given their history of co-operation with IT Sligo.

Furthermore, all of these institutions were operating in broadly similar territories with similar student profiles and the researcher believed the data which may be gathered from institutes of technology based in Dublin may be less conducive to comparison due to the different lifestyle associated with urban living. Given the concentration of large national and multinational employers in the greater Dublin area, the decision of a mature learner to return to education may be influenced by an employee education fund or promotion potential. This is less likely in the more rural areas where the majority of the labour force is employed by small to medium enterprises, which more often than not do not have the budget to fund further education for staff.

The Registrar of each of the institutes was contacted by e-mail. An outline of the study and an assurance of confidentiality of data were sent, along with the request that they allow their students to participate in the study (Appendix A). Following agreement to participate, each Registrar was also asked if they or their administrative staff would be willing to send the link to the online questionnaire on my behalf to all of their mature learners i.e. all learners who were 23 or over on the 1st of January in the year of registration. This approach ensured that the learners would receive the e-mail from a reputable and trusted source rather than from me directly. The hope was that participation would be higher if the students were assured that the research was legitimate and approved by their institute.

Four of the institutes were happy to agree to participation immediately and accepted that the ethical issues surrounding the research were satisfactorily addressed given that the approval of the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee had been secured. However, one of the institutes required submission of a research proposal to their own research ethics committee using their organisation’s submission form and guidelines. This was completed and approval was eventually granted but unfortunately did result in a four month delay in completion of the first phase of the research. The decision could have been taken earlier to simply omit this institute from the research, however, I was confident that the research was being undertaken in an ethical manner and posed little or no threat to participants and therefore decided to persist in including the organisation in the research.

**3.6.2 Phase one: pilot research**

The pilot research was conducted on the mature student population undertaking the Bachelor of Business Studies and the Bachelor of Applied Social Science degrees at the participating institute, which are both offered on a full and part time basis. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed for this pilot research, the details of which are the same as the methods described for the main research in section 3.6.3 and 3.6.4 below. The quantitative research focused on the general experience of the mature learners and the qualitative research focused on the actual experience of selected willing participants. The main bulk of the research focused on the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews which were then analysed using open and axial coding. The mixed methods approach was intended to increase the validity of the findings and allow greater potential for theory generation following data analysis and of course reflected the design of the main research that was planned. A mixed methods approach to the inquiry was used involving the use of an online survey (*n*=75) to gather quantitative data followed by semi-structured interviews (*n*=3) with willing participants to gather qualitative data. The findings from the research were presented at the International Conference on Engaging Pedagogy in December 2012. As the research methods were deemed to be fit for purpose, the main study followed the same format.

**3.6.3 Phase two: online survey**

The decision was taken to use an online questionnaire as it was believed to be the most efficient way to target the mature learner population in the participating institutes. Arguably some mature learners were perhaps less likely to engage with an online survey than a survey conducted in person or by post but the scope of this research would not permit those methods. Furthermore the online survey was deemed to be more desirable as it would facilitate access to a larger number of learners than could otherwise have been achieved. The online survey authoring software package that was used, Survey Monkey™, allowed for the use of pre a designed template. The advantage of using an online survey is the ease of access to participants in distant locations (Wright, 2005), also it was not time sensitive, so full and part time students could access the survey in their own time rather than during college hours; flexibility and convenience are some of the major advantages of using an online survey. Another advantage of this method is question diversity, there is quick and easy access to a range of question types from dichotomous, to multiple-choice and open ended, all of which could be presented in an easy to understand fashion. Also, it is believed that people are less inhibited and more honest when completing online surveys provided they are assured of confidentially and anonymity. The automated data collection allowed for great ease of gathering the data and minimised the amount of time required for collection, thus increasing the amount of available time for analysis and presentation of findings.

**Table 5: Number of mature learners contacted in each institute of technology**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Institute of Technology** | **Number of Mature Learners Contacted** |
| Athlone IT | 2,155 |
| Dundalk IT | 1,163 |
| Galway Mayo IT | 2,352 |
| Letterkenny IT | 1,048 |
| Sligo IT | 2,226 |
| **TOTAL** | **8,944** |

There are some difficulties associated with using an online survey tool for any research such as the likelihood of a smaller response rate than associated with surveys conducted in person, unclear answering instructions, impersonality and concerns of the respondent around security and privacy issues (Evans & Mathur, 2005). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that all of the target population actually engage with their college e-mail account, despite the fact that one is issued for every registered student. In addition, when student mailboxes are full they will simply bounce an e-mail back, and this student will not be successfully contacted. However, the drawbacks of this research method were outnumbered by the advantages and were preferable to the disadvantages and difficulties that would have been associated with a postal or personal survey.

The use of quantitative data is closely associated with the positivist perspective of trying to apply natural science research methods to the social science field. However, this mixed methods research exhibits reflexivity rather than positivism throughout. There is no way that the tool used to gather the quantitative data, the questionnaire, could be constructed without some bias from my experience as a lecturer of mature learners. In addition the questionnaire was structured after a significant amount of literature had been read in relation to the topic under investigation. Despite this acknowledgement of the contamination through my previous social experiences I do not believe that the research is hindered in any significant way by this reflexivity.

**3.6.4 Content and structure of the survey**

Having made the decision to use an online survey authoring package, attention then turned to the content and structure of the questionnaire. Given the difficulty of encouraging potential respondents to participate in the survey, a very conscious effort was made to limit the number of questions. It was designed to ensure that it was long enough to provide a meaningful amount of data, but short enough to ensure students would respond. It was determined that five questions would require minimal commitment by the respondent and would allow for the gathering of an acceptable amount of data, appropriate for this research.

Question one sought purely nominal data, classifying the respondents into full or part time student categories. This was a dichotomous question which was an easy start for participants. The second question was slightly more complex and sought ordinal data for three categories. Students were asked to classify their experience in relation to (a) other students, (b) lecturing staff and (c) mature learner support services on a scale from very negative to very positive, with an option ‘does not apply to me’, there was also an ‘additional comments’ box left for any additional qualitative responses the students wished to leave. This was followed by a multiple choice question which then led into another ordinal data question with five categories and an open ended response area where students could elaborate on their concerns. The fifth and final question asked respondents to leave their name and contact details if they were willing to take part in a follow-up interview.

The questionnaire had a short introduction before question one outlining the purpose of the research and an assurance that any information gathered from the survey would be held in the strictest confidence (Appendix C). After the last question respondents were thanked for their participation. The layout was very simple and a gentle colour scheme of grey and purple was selected. The wording of the questionnaire was designed with the intention of avoiding any questions that would be irritating or confusing to the participants. Also, every effort was made to try to ensure that the questions were not leading in any way. The questions only sought information that the respondents were likely to have i.e. their personal status and opinions (Denscombe: 2003). The language used was unambiguous and no jargon was used; all questions included were deemed to be vital for the research and were as short and straight forward as possible. Where multiple choice answers were used an all-encompassing option was included for those who were unable to rate their experience or opinion on the scale that was offered e.g. ‘does not apply to me’.

**3.6.5 Distribution**

The Registrar’s administrators in each of the participating IoTs agreed to send the survey link via student e-mail to all of their registered mature learners. The decision was taken to request distribution in this manner in an effort to ensure students that this was a legitimate piece of research that was approved of by their own institute. It was intended to try to increase the response rate and also avoided any issues in relation to data protection if I were to request the e-mail addresses for the students.

**3.6.6 Response rates**

In theory, all registered mature learners were contacted and invited to take part in this survey; that is to say that if a student was registered as a mature learner with their institute of technology then they were on the mailing list for the survey link. However, there were a number of reasons why the mature learner may not have participated despite the invitation being extended. Firstly, they may simply have chosen not to participate for various personal reasons ranging from lack of available time to apathy; secondly, they may not have received the invitation e-mail and link to the online questionnaire if their college mailbox was full, thirdly technological issues such as a bad connection to the internet or an inactive link may have prevented their participation or they may not be using their college e-mail at all.

Determining an acceptable response rate was difficult and somewhat futile as the students invited to participate could not be compelled to do so. A number of steps were taken to try to ensure that the response rate was maximised. The purpose of the survey was very clearly outlined in the e-mail that was sent to the target population; assurances of anonymity and confidentiality were included. Nulty (2008: 302) outlines the importance of assuring students that their “responses will be de-identified” and will be used in aggregate after results have been issued when trying to illicit responses in the educational setting.

Sufficient time was given and access to the online survey was allowed for a number of months for four institutes and for three weeks for the final institute which was later in agreeing to participate.

Sheehan (2001: 1) argues that survey length, respondent contacts, design issues, research affiliation and compensation are important factors that influence response rates. The online survey was designed with these factors in mind. A short survey was designed and the maximum time it was expected to take was five minutes, in fact many of the respondents had completed the survey in less than three minutes. The respondents were contacted via their own institute’s administrators to try to assure them of the legitimacy of the research but no pre-notification was given. If I were contacting the participants directly pre-notification would have been an option but given that the distribution was being undertaken by each institute purely through good will, I was not willing to request more than one mailing to the group. Therefore follow-up via e-mail was not possible either, which is unfortunate as this may have increased response rates somewhat. The research was believed to be salient to the population that were being contacted, however, as Sheehan eloquently writes “salience, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder” (2001: 1) and therefore there is little one can do to endear the survey to the respondents, however, a clear title which related to the population was used in the hope of capturing their attention and creating an interest in the topic under investigation.

Clear instructions and simple language was used to construct the questionnaire and where possible closed dichotomous or multichotomous questions were used. Very simple colours were used with a standard font and the questions appeared on one page so that the respondent could see the end before they even began. No compensation was offered for participation in this research but this is not likely to have had a major effect on the response rate. Göritz examined the impact of material incentives on response quantity and quality and found that various types and amount of material rewards used in online panel surveys “have no or only mild effects on response quantity and no effect on response quality” (Göritz , 2004: 337).

The response rate from the institute where I am employed was likely to have had a higher response rather than other institutes, however, due to the commitment not to profile the data by institute this was not measured. “Respondents who you know by name or have regular contact with will be more likely to respond to your survey than respondents you do not know” (University of Texas at Austin, 2007: 1). It could be argued however that the quality and honesty of responses gathered from institutes that are not associated with me in any way, could have been higher given that online surveys allow for distance and may offer the students an opportunity to answer honestly about their college experiences, without fear of retribution for negative comments. Dommeyer et al (2004) conclude that teaching evaluations conducted online provide more information from open ended questions than surveys conducted in class as the student has time to reflect on what they are doing when they complete the survey at a time of their own choosing and away from the influence of any tutors or faculty members. It is not unreasonable to assume that this would be similar for a questionnaire which is asking about student experience, which in some way could be perceived as being a reflection of the institute which provides the context for that experience. More honest and full answers are likely to be given through an online questionnaire that is not directly associated with the institute the mature learner is attending.

The pilot survey achieved a response rate of 10%, and it was hoped that this rate or at least close to it could be achieved again for the main study. There were 763 responses recorded on the online software package, 738 complete responses and 25 partially complete. This represents a high response quality which is as important as response rate. Response quality is based on the number of items omitted, the completeness of answer, the response time and speed and respondent satisfaction (Wright & Schwager, 2008: 258). The final question in this survey asked respondents to provide contact details if they would be happy to participate in a follow-up interview; 38.8% of respondents (*n=296*) left their details which would indicate a significant level of respondent satisfaction. Incomplete responses were still considered valid and are included in the findings; this is mainly because of the aforementioned question which asked the respondent to leave their contact details if they were willing to take part in an interview. Therefore incomplete responses are still relevant when trying to establish an overview of the population even if they were not willing to participate further in the study. The number of total responses represents a response rate of 8.5% which was deemed acceptable as the main purpose of this research is to gain insight into learner experience rather than to make generalisations about the population which makes high response rates less important.

**3.6.7 Phase three: semi-structured interviews**

When the willing participants were gathered from the online survey, they were then organised by institute, using Excel™, based on the date of response or e-mail addresses provided. However, this was not an exact science as students had not been asked to identify their institute and some gave contact details other than their student e-mail address. This was undertaken to facilitate stratified random sampling. Once stratified an online random number generator was used to identify a participant. Once selected the participant was then contacted to confirm that they were willing to participate and to try to arrange an interview. Some participants were not contactable and some were rejected on the basis that a reasonably even spread of male and female participants was desired to try to control for any gender differences that might skew the findings.

Three of the interviews were conducted in person and the other seven were conducted by telephone. The decision as to which method was offered to the candidates and unsurprisingly given the time restraints that many mature learners find themselves under, the majority opted for telephone interviews. An interview schedule was used for all interviews (Appendix E), but given the semi-structured nature the course of the interviews varied from one participant to the next. All of the interviews were recorded, with the consent of the participants and were then transcribed verbatim (Appendices G through P).

When the interviews had been transcribed and initial open coding had been conducted, a summary of the contents of the interview was sent to all participants in order for them to verify that the information and meaning that they had intended to convey was being represented. Eight of the ten participants responded and confirmed that the summary of the interview was representative of their experiences (Appendix Q). Of the two participants who did not respond, one had been explicit from the outset that she was very time poor and had significant family commitments and the other has a long term disability. Rather than harass these participants for their confirmation, I decided that given that all of the eighty per cent of interviewees who had responded were satisfied with my representation of their interviews, then the interpretation of the other two could also be considered acceptable and sought approval for that decision from my critical friend, which was granted.

**3.6.8 Phase four: hindsight interviews**

Initial analysis of the findings from phases two and three from the research indicated that there was some evidence of Mezirow’s ten phases of transformative learning in the narrative of one of the mature learners. In order to further explore this concept a number of brief hindsight telephone interviews were conducted to ask students to reflect on their experience fourteen months after the initial interviews had been conducted. The transcripts from these interviews are presented in Appendices U through X. The purpose of the hindsight interviews was exploration of the possible relevance of the transformative learning theory to other students who had participated, but was not intended to manipulate or force results that were not actually there. The evidence or lack thereof that was gleaned from the hindsight interviews is presented in the discussion section.

**3.7 Data analysis**

The methods used to verify and analyse the data are presented in this section.

**3.7.1 Quantitative data**

The quantitative data were gathered using an online survey tool which allows for the accurate capture of data. The data were stratified according to whether the respondent was a full or part time learner. They were analysed using tables to provide an overview of the mature learner population, which resulted in the ability to determine the extent to which the mode of delivery was of relevance to mature learner experience. Summary data are presented in the tables 6 through 12.

**3.7.2 Qualitative data**

One of the difficulties of qualitative data resulting from an interview is that of verifying the data. While it was possible to verify that my interpretation of the data was believed to be accurate by checking it with the respondents, it is not possible to authenticate the reported experience itself. However, for the purpose of this research it is not essential that the data are factually correct; it is accepted that the participants are transparent reporters of their own lived experience (Rogers, 2007: 104). That is to say, I did not query whether or not what the respondents were saying was actually true, because the focus was on their experience and therefore their reporting of that experience must be assumed to be true, this is the essence of hermeneutic phenomenology. Furthermore there are nuances that cannot be said, cannot be put into words, elements such as tone of voice, use of pause or change of posture. Where possible notes were made during transcription to record such nuances for example where the respondent laughed or was sarcastic, however, these notes were used with caution as there was a danger that my interpretation could take precedence over the raw data, the respondents actual words. Heidegger discussed this difficulty where a phenomenon is something that can show itself but equally can appear like something else. These nuances are like what he refers to as symptoms of an illness, “certain occurrences in the body which show themselves and which, in showing themselves ‘indicate’ something which does not show itself” (Heidegger, 1962: 52).

**3.7.3 Qualitative data coding and analysis**

As the student experience is best measured through words as opposed to numbers, the main bulk of the research focussed on the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews which were then analysed using open and axial coding through NVivo 10™ software. Initially the interview transcripts were imported into NVivo 10™ and the open coding began. The software however, was not to my liking and so the additional coding was undertaken in Excel™ but retained the codes and nodes that had been established in NVivo 10™. The nodes that were established from the initial open coding were, in alphabetical order, as follows:

* Assessments
* Employment
* Experience
* Fears or concerns
* Finance
* Learner supports
* Lecturers
* Life balance
* Other students
* Reasons for study
* Teaching methods

These nodes were then applied to the qualitative data gathered from the online surveys. Open ended responses were permitted for three of the five questions. Question five was gathering the contact information for potential interview participants and therefore was not coded. Questions two and four asked about student experience and student concerns respectively. The qualitative responses to these questions were divided according to whether the student was full or part time and where possible, the comments were coded to the nodes listed above. Another node ‘other’ was initially included to code any data that did not fit into the existing nodes. The data in the ‘other’ node was then reviewed to determine if any other relevant nodes needed to be added to the coding and two additional nodes, ‘Isolation’ and ‘Travel’ were introduced. Colour codes were used in Excel™ to code the qualitative data from the questionnaire so that it could be analysed to the themes that were investigated under (Appendix R).

In keeping with the interpretative phenomenological approach outlined above, the data were organised by theme using the codes and are presented in the findings chapter. Minimal analysis was applied at this point. The interpretative analysis occurs in the discussion chapter which seeks to apply meaning to the narratives of the participants.

**3.8 Conclusion**

Consideration of the appropriate methodology for this research hinged primarily on one objective: to report the lived experience of mature learners honestly and fairly. The philosophical underpinnings draw on the work of Mezirow profoundly but are also very heavily influenced by the writings of Jung, who focuses on the liminal place between the adult and true self. The andragogy model advanced by Knowles helps to position the research in terms of how education of the individual is affected by their individual and situational differences and also how their education can result in individual, institutional and societal growth.

A mixed methods approach was used for a number of reasons. Firstly the survey was designed to test a broad population to try to determine what the key issues facing the population of mature learners in the participating institutes are, and whether or not the mode of delivery affected those issues. Secondly the interview phase was designed to garner a deeper understanding of the lived experience of mature learners. The use of mixed methods provided triangulation also, which it is hoped increased the validity and rigor of the research. Furthermore I ensured that the participants were happy with my representation of their experiences and the critical friend was used to ensure that no bias was applied to the data either unintentionally or deliberately. Every effort was made to ensure that the research process was undertaken in an ethical and fair manner which allowed for a true representation of mature learner experiences to be gathered and analysed. The findings from the research can be found in the following chapter 4 where minimal interpretation has been applied, and they are analysed and discussed in chapter 5.

**4.0 Findings**

**4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings from both the quantitative and the qualitative data that was gathered during this research. An online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data from mature learners across five Irish institutes of technology. Primarily the focus of this chapter is to present the data in raw form as it was reported. This is in keeping with the interpretative phenomenological approach which states that the researcher must firstly try to understand and report the lived experience of the individual and only then explicitly include their interpretation of the data in a wider context.

The data are presented according to three main themes (1) the barriers to higher education (2) the personal experiences and concerns of mature learners and (3) the quality of the education provision. As the data from the questionnaires are anonymous, direct quotations from participants are identified by their Microsoft Excel™ cell number, full or part time status and the question number and an alias is used for the interviewees. Some limited analysis takes place in this chapter, but the researcher was conscious of van Manen’s assertion that “reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications” (van Manen, 2007:13). Therefore where possible raw data has been used in this section and the findings are discussed more fully in the following chapter which seeks to position these findings in the existing body of knowledge and theoretical framework to generate new knowledge.

Some of the findings that are presented in this chapter verify existing knowledge, particularly in relation to the external barriers that mature learners face, such as financial issues and time management. However, they were deemed to warrant further representation here as these themes permeated the entire research and therefore are important when it comes to understanding the context in which the other findings exist. The most unique findings in this research relate primarily to the way in which higher education has been transformational for the participants and also the impact of the mode of delivery on the experience of mature learner. These aspects are explored more fully in chapter 5 where, as dictated by the IPA method, the explicit interpretation occurs.

**4.1.1 Phase two online survey overview**

All of the quantitative data for this research was gathered from an online survey which was distributed via e-mail to the entire mature learner population throughout the five IoTs under investigation. While the main body of the qualitative data for the research was gathered from phase two, the semi-structured interviews, there was also some qualitative data gathered from the online survey. From a total of 8,944 students that were targeted, 763 participants responded. Percentages outlined in this chapter are calculated as a percentage of the response rate for the relevant question and are rounded to the nearest whole number. No data from question five is presented in this report due to its confidential nature.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 6: All respondents question 1** | | |
| **Are you studying on a full or part time basis?** | | |
| **Answer Options** | **Response Percent** | **Response Count** |
| Full time | 88.3% | 674 |
| Part time | 11.7% | 89 |
| ***Total answered question*** | | **763** |

As is evident from the table above, the majority of the responses came from full time students almost 90%. This is not surprising given that the majority of students in the population that was surveyed are full time students; but a greater number of part time responses would have been expected. However, those who are attending an IoT on a part time basis are most likely doing so due to current employment or family commitments which likely impact on their time significantly and therefore may make them less likely to respond. This ratio of full to part time learners was not applied to phase two of this research, the semi structured interview, as it would have resulted in just one part time student being interviewed. Instead, four part time and six full time students were selected.

**4.1.2 Phase three semi-structured interview overview**

The findings from the second phase of the research, the semi structured interviews, are also presented in this section. The interviews were conducted in person or by telephone and were recorded with the consent of the participants and interview notes were taken also. I then transcribed all of the interviews using an alias for each participant to protect their anonymity; these are the names that appear below along with the letters PT (part time) or FT (full time) to denote the mode of delivery of their programme.

The transcripts were imported into NVivo10™ to assist with the qualitative data analysis. Using this software the transcripts were coded to eleven different nodes using open coding and the findings from the interviews are presented in this section by node title. The nodes included, in alphabetical order:

1. Assessments
2. Employment
3. Experience
4. Fears or concerns
5. Finance
6. Learner supports
7. Lecturers
8. Life balance
9. Other students
10. Reasons for study
11. Teaching and learning methods

**4.2 Barriers to higher education for mature learners**

Many barriers to higher education that face mature learners are well documented in the existing literature. While it could be argued that external barriers are not in fact the only or main reason why mature learners do not participate in higher education, for the purpose of this research barriers to higher education are interpreted as factors that make accessing education more difficult for mature learners. The survey sought to verify that the reported barriers exist for this cohort and to identify any new barriers that may not have previously been reported. Question four was the most complex question on the questionnaire, it sought ordinal data on six categories which may or may not have been of concern to the mature learner. In addition, this question also had a comment box entitled ‘other concerns you had’ which allowed for the collection of qualitative data related to student concerns. The quantitative ordinal data is presented on the tables 7 and 8.

The qualitative data was taken from the survey software and exported into Microsoft Excel™ for analysis. The responses were coded in line with the nodes outlined in section 3.7.3 and above. For example the quotation *“Time for my family other than the usual Mom chores”* was coded at the node ‘Life balance’ and the quotation *“Some peer concerns, they think I’m a bit odd”* was coded at the nodes ‘Other students’ and ‘Isolation’ (Appendix R).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 7: Full time respondents question 4** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Please indicate to what extent, if any, the following issues were of concern to you during your studies.** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Answer Options** | **Of major concern** | | **Of some concern** | | **Of little concern** | | **Of no concern** | | **N/A** | | **Rating Average** | | **Response Count** | |
| Ability to succeed | 254 | | **269** | | 94 | | 53 | | 3 | | 1.92 | | 673 | |
| Financial issues | **401** | | 211 | | 44 | | 12 | | 3 | | 1.50 | | 671 | |
| Time pressure | 278 | | **297** | | 77 | | 13 | | 2 | | 1.74 | | 667 | |
| Personal relationships | 98 | | **248** | | 179 | | 132 | | 14 | | 2.53 | | 671 | |
| Integration with other learners | 44 | | 186 | | **229** | | 208 | | 2 | | 2.90 | | 669 | |
|  | | | | | | | | | | | | |  | |
| ***Total answered question*** | | | | | | | | | | | | | **674** | |
| **Table 8: Part time respondents question 4** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Please indicate to what extent, if any, the following issues were of concern to you during your studies.** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Answer Options** | | **Of major concern** | | **Of some concern** | | **Of little concern** | | **Of no concern** | | **N/A** | | **Rating Average** | | **Response Count** | |
| Ability to succeed | | 22 | | **45** | | 15 | | 4 | | 0 | | 2.01 | | 86 | |
| Financial issues | | **42** | | 22 | | 14 | | 9 | | 0 | | 1.89 | | 87 | |
| Time pressure | | **43** | | 29 | | 11 | | 2 | | 0 | | 1.67 | | 85 | |
| Personal relationships | | 14 | | **34** | | 20 | | 18 | | 0 | | 2.49 | | 86 | |
| Integration with other learners | | 3 | | 26 | | **34** | | 20 | | 3 | | 2.86 | | 86 | |
|  | | | | | | | | | | | | | |  | |
| ***Total answered question*** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | **89** | |

**4.2.1 External barriers to higher education**

A number of barriers that were identified by the participants in this research can be classified as external barriers in the sense that they are extrinsic factors that the individual has little or no control over.

**4.2.1.1 Financial issues**

The most worrying issue for full time students who took the survey and the close second most worrying aspect for part time students was finance, 59% of full time and 47% reported it as being ‘of major concern’. In fact, 91% of full time students rated it as being ‘of major concern’ or ‘of some concern’, while 72% of part time students rated it as such. Given that many part time students are engaged in full time employment, it was probably to be expected that full time students would feel the pressure of financial issues more. 10% of part time students said financial issues were ‘of no concern’ compared to just 2% of full time students. Some of the full time students said the following:

*“The financial pressure’s alarming…”* [C21, FT, Q4]

*“Financial issues could force me to quit.”* [C24, FT, Q4]

*“Finances for a mature student with six children and no grant … I paid for the first two years and now I feel discriminated against as I live 80 miles from college and have to survive on €188 per week. What’s wrong with our country?”* [C30, FT, Q4]

*“[concerns are] mainly financial, as I am a single mother.”* [C38, FT, Q4]

*“Financial was my major concern, had previously been to college and fees were crippling.”* [C72, FT, Q4]

There were some students who also believe that the financial pressure is affecting their ability to achieve their true academic potential.

*“Financial pressure leads me to working more i.e. 30 hours on top of my full time course which is affecting my grades.”* [C53, FT, Q4]

*“Work part time to fund college, impacts on amount of hours I can devote to coursework.”* [C54, FT, Q4]

It is accepted that the opportunity cost associated with trying to improve your education, and in turn your future earning potential, includes the lost earnings that you give up to become a student. However, the loss of potential income for mature learners is often more pronounced than for the school leaver as a higher proportion of them are likely to have dependents that must also be catered for. Also, the assurance that their future earning potential is likely to be higher than those who do not have qualifications is of little comfort to students when their financial commitments remain omnipresent. One student felt that their institution could help to alleviate some of the financial pressure and wrote:

*“The IT should take into account that people are awaiting grants when writing out to them and asking for money for fees, with a little thought a lot of pressure could be removed from sometimes vulnerable students.”* [C55, FT, Q4]

Many of the students who were interviewed had experienced anxiety over their financial affairs while studying. David was lucky enough to have had funds available to pay for his course and he was also working full time while studying part time, however, he did mention that he had considered another course but decided against doing it because it was too expensive. For many others the financial matters were much more of a concern, and the financial issues seemed to be of more concern to the full time students than to their part time counterparts.

When asked what his main concern was in relation to going to college Darragh was very clear.

*“Money… the main one… money was the biggest issue.”* (Darragh, FT)

When asked at the end of the interview about his experience more generally, Darragh returned to the topic of money.

*“…the biggest drawback for me over there is the financial end of it. It’s the biggest problem… like a €500 grant is cut back to €300 that you get at the start… and then were was other payments you used to have…and they’re gone.”*(Darragh, FT)

Emma initially thought that she was eligible for a grant, but then discovered that because she had previously completed a Master’s degree she was not going to be able to get funding, however, if she wanted to do an undergraduate course she would have been funded. Fortunately, when the funding was withdrawn, Emma’s father was able to provide financial assistance.

*“…like I literally, I was crying… what have I done going back… I thought I was getting a grant I started the course then they told me I wasn’t eligible because I had a Masters before… it’s our system so they took it off me.”* (Emma, PT)

Mary also received less financial support from the state than she would have expected.

*“…the only concern I would have was the budget, the grant was reduced an awful lot for me because I still live with my Dad…it’s just money is the hardest part…”* (Mary, FT)

Gary discussed the additional costs associated with returning to education and explained how those extra expenditures were another cause for concern.

*“…the financial end of it is worrying because again when you are unemployed and you’ve got a mortgage and kids to feed and all the rest of it… you’ve the extra cost of you know petrol and eh, your equipment and things like that.”* (Gary, FT)

Tina identified the opportunity cost associated with her return to education. Initially the idea to return to education came about as redundancy seemed likely in her existing role, however, she was not made redundant but decided to return to college anyway, therefore she was giving up her potential earnings in addition to taking on the costs associated with further education.

*“Well it was a big financial commitment… I had been probably earning nearly forty grand a year… I wasn’t sure that I would get much in the way of part time work…it was going to be a big drop in income and just wasn’t sure really that I could afford it.”* (Tina, FT)

Gary had made the tough decision to return to education even though he could not really afford it, in the hope that his future earnings would make the current sacrifices worthwhile for him and his family.

*“Financially I have a mortgage which is, I’m going behind on, I’ve kids to support… you know so I have to sort of try and catch up financially… the whole reason for this course was employment so I need to get out and get employment this year.”* (Gary, FT)

Sarah found herself in a difficult situation when it came to trying to fund her education as she was not eligible for a grant as she was not intending to return to college in a full time capacity but this was due to health issues. Eventually her father funded her return to education.

*“They [finances] were of concern and to be honest… I tried to get some help from the government… I’m on a disability benefit and they only give help when you are doing a full time course and I’m trying to explain I couldn’t do a full time course because of my health...”* (Sarah, PT)

**4.2.1.2 Time pressures**

The distribution of survey responses changed between full and part time students when it came to time pressures. Unsurprisingly, a higher proportion of the part time students (48%) reported time pressure as being ‘of major concern’ than the full time cohort (41%). Time pressure was likely to be of more concern to part time students as it can be assumed that by and large they are otherwise engaged during the day either through employment or home duties, whereas the full time students are more likely to have more time to focus on their study even if they are working or parenting in their remaining time.

*“Time for my children other than the usual Mom chores”* [C15, FT, Q4]

*“Time management between college work, home life and work, the balance is difficult to achieve”* [C34, FT, Q4]

*“Finding the time to complete assignments because I have children at home.”* [C40, FT, Q4]

*“I have a long term illness, so having to take time off with that.”* [C73, FT, Q4]

*“Childcare and lack of time to spend with children.”* [C76, FT, Q4]

*“How I would have time to complete assignments, while also looking after my young children and maintaining a house.”* [C95, FT, Q4]

*“Time is a major factor with two different placements… along with doing a full time job, attend college, assignments etc.”* [C21, PT, Q4]

Work/life balance became a common theme when students responded in the comment box entitled ‘other concerns you had’ and this is inextricably linked to a sense of not having enough time. Both full and part time students expressed concerns about trying to balance both and feeling pressurised by a lack of time. Those who explicitly spoke about ‘time’ have been included here and those who referred more to trying to achieve balance are included in the section 4.3 which examines the data related to learner experience and concerns.

**4.2.1.3 Travel**

For some students, travel was a concern that they expressed; for some it was the length of time required to commute, for others it was the expense or weather conditions. Others did not specify why but did list travel as a concern.

*“Transportation during bad weather.”* [C61, FT, Q4]

*“Transport.”* [C65, FT, Q4]

*“…the commute can also be a concern, due to bad weather, time and expense.”* [C96, FT, Q4]

**4.2.2 Internal barriers to higher education**

For some of the learners the barriers they faced were more intrinsic; most notably fears related to their ability to succeed were of major concern and posed the most obvious barrier. Having said that, the participants in this survey had obviously found some way to overcome this fear, at least to some extent, as they had actually been successful in securing a place in their IoT.

The existing literature clearly indicated that many mature learners worry about whether or not they will be academically able for a further or higher education course (Philips, 1986), this is especially true of students who have not engaged in education in a long time. However, the literature also indicates that often mature learners surprise themselves in terms of their ability when they are actually in education (Shanahan, 2000). Question three on the survey was designed to reveal whether or not the mature learners’ expectations in terms of course content were accurate prior to commencing their study.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 9: Full time respondents question 3** | | |
| **How did you find the content of your course?** | | |
| **Answer Options** | **Response Percent** | **Response Count** |
| A lot more difficult than expected | 15.8% | 106 |
| A little more difficult than expected | 38.2% | **257** |
| Exactly as expected | 22.6% | 152 |
| A little easier than expected | 13.5% | 91 |
| A lot easier than expected | 3.7% | 25 |
| Had no expectations | 6.2% | 42 |
| ***Total answered question*** | | **673** |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 10: Part time respondents question 3** | | |
| **How did you find the content of your course?** | | |
| **Answer Options** | **Response Percent** | **Response Count** |
| A lot more difficult than expected | 14.6% | 13 |
| A little more difficult than expected | 40.4% | **36** |
| Exactly as expected | 24.7% | 22 |
| A little easier than expected | 13.5% | 12 |
| A lot easier than expected | 0.0% | 0 |
| Had no expectations | 6.7% | 6 |
| ***Total answered question*** | | **89** |

The data reveals that for both cohorts, the majority of students felt that the content of the course was ‘a little more difficult than expected’ (38% of full time and 40% of part time). This was then followed by ‘exactly as expected’, ‘a lot more difficult than expected’, ‘a little easier than expected’, ‘had no expectations’ and ‘a lot easier than expected’, in that order.

Of the full time students, 4% felt the content was a lot easier than expected. As there were no qualitative data gathered for this question it is not possible to further explore why that was, however, the qualitative data from the interviews does reinforce this stance in relation to particular modules that the participants believed were too easy.

None of the part time respondents believed that it was a lot easier than expected and as there are no qualitative data to further explore this question, a definitive reason for this cannot be drawn. However, it does make me wonder if content or the delivery of part time courses tends to be more suited to mature learners who are solely integrated with other mature learners and therefore perhaps more academically challenged by their lecturers. When reflecting on my own practice as a lecturer of mature learners in both circumstances I felt that I tend to challenge the part time students more in terms of the level of contribution that they are asked to give in class. This is not just based on their status as mature learners, but also on the fact that class sizes for part time mature learners tend to be significantly smaller than full time classes of traditional and mature learners, thus allowing the scope for deeper learning.

Linked to this, question four also queried the extent to which the ability to succeed was of concern to the survey respondents and also allowed for the capture of some qualitative data. The ability to succeed was ‘of some concern’ to the majority of both full (40%) and part time (51%) students, but a significant proportion also reported this as being ‘of major concern’, 38% of full time and 25% of part time students. This would indicate that 78% of full time students and 76% of part time students found the ability to succeed to be of some or major concern to them. This finding was expected given existing literature. However, some of the data from the interviews contradicts this and will be explored later. Many students expressed fears of failure and were concerned about their ability to succeed given their own shortcomings or situational factors that they felt were putting them at a disadvantage.

*“As a mature student I have little IT experience and feel this is not catered for…”* [C15, PT, Q4]

*“There is a reason part time students are part time most of my colleagues are also working full time and/or have families. We are expected to do 400 hours placement along with attending college and assignments… full time students are given a block period to do this placement.”* [C21, PT, Q4]

*“The amount of theory over a short period of time and not being up to date with computer technology.”* [C14, FT, Q4]

*“Do I have some bad organisations skills?”* [C25, FT, Q4]

*“Wondering if I was able for it and the ability to pass exams.”* [C52, FT, Q4]

For one student their issue was not about being able to succeed, rather it was frustrating that they did not feel that they were acquiring new knowledge, which in itself is hindering them from achieving what they had set out to achieve.

*“Repeating of subject matter already learnt and applied whilst working in industry for 10+ years.”* [C66, FT, Q4]

Also there were a number of students who described the desire to be more than just satisfactory but to excel. For these students success was not just about passing the exams it was about achieving the highest level possible. They wanted to achieve what they believed to be their own personal best and they wanted the recognition for their hard work.

*“Not just passing, but getting a 1st.”* [C56, FT, Q4]

*“There was a group of mature students at [name of IT] and we just gelled together for security but ended up detesting each other at the end of the degree, the reason was jockeying for position i.e. high achiever.”* [C41, FT, Q4]

*“Mature students are a lot more competitive with each other.”*[C50, FT, Q4]

*“Perhaps not being given enough opportunity to show individual ability when doing assessments…”* [C83, FT, Q4]

This pressure that mature learners are placing on themselves goes some way to explaining why they achieve higher levels of academic achievement than their younger peers (Shanahan, 2000). Betty expressed concerns about her ability to succeed due to her belief that she is not particularly strong academically, and Emma described feeling very distressed in her first semester.

*“My spellings wouldn’t be great now I’d be very bad at writing things… I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to keep up or do assignments… I wouldn’t be the best and never have been… I wondered was I able for it when I was going back.”* (Betty, PT)

*“… the two of us sat down crying so often up to Christmas… going… what are they talking about… how do we do it….”*(Emma, PT)

These feelings of doubt are indicative of one of the most common internal barriers to higher education for mature learners, the fear of failure. The following section further explores the internal barriers that mature learners face in terms of what they reported as being of concern to them and how their previous experience or lack thereof impacted on their mature learner experience.

**4.3 Personal experiences and concerns**

The data from tables 7 and 8 captured some of the concerns that were faced by the mature learners who responded to the survey; those that relate to personal experiences and concerns are outlined here along with the experiences and concerns of the interviewees. Question two asked students to rate their experience on a scale from very negative to very positive in relation to three areas; their interaction with other students, lecturing staff and mature learner support services. Tables 11 and 12 below outline the responses from the full and part time cohorts.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 11: Full time respondents question 2** | | | | | | | | | |
| **How would you rate your experience as a mature learner at your institute for the following categories?** | | | | | | | | |
| **Answer Options** | **Very negative** | **Somewhat negative** | **Neutral** | **Somewhat positive** | **Very positive** | **Does not apply to me** | **Rating Average** | **Response Count** |
| Interaction with other students | 5 | 32 | 50 | 158 | **426** | 1 | 4.44 | 672 |
| Interaction with lecturing staff | 6 | 15 | 46 | 137 | **463** | 1 | 4.56 | 668 |
| Interaction with mature learner support services | 30 | 54 | **242** | 75 | 114 | 146 | 3.95 | 661 |
|  | | | | | | | |  |
| ***Total answered question*** | | | | | | | | **674** |
| **Table 12: Part time respondents question 2** | | | | | | | | |
| **How would you rate your experience as a mature learner at your institute for the following categories?** | | | | | | | | |
| **Answer Options** | **Very negative** | **Somewhat negative** | **Neutral** | **Somewhat positive** | **Very positive** | **Does not apply to me** | **Rating Average** | **Response Count** |
| Interaction with other students | 1 | 9 | 13 | 20 | **44** | 2 | 4.16 | 89 |
| Interaction with lecturing staff | 0 | 7 | 8 | 21 | **53** | 0 | 4.35 | 89 |
| Interaction with mature learner support services | 3 | 5 | **31** | 19 | 15 | 16 | 3.97 | 89 |
|  | | | | | | | |  |
| ***Total answered question*** | | | | | | | | **89** |

It is initially evident that the pattern of responses between the full and part time learners is broadly similar, but some differences were noted.

**4.3.1 Interaction with other students**

The majority of both cohorts reported a very positive experience with other students; 63% of full time, 49% of part time. This was followed by a somewhat positive experience, neutral, somewhat negative and very negative in that order. Only a very small proportion reported a very negative experience, 7% of full time and 1% of part time. While these are very small percentages there was a significantly larger proportion of full time students reporting a very negative experience relative to their part time counterparts. This is perhaps as a result of the fact that full time students are much more likely to be integrated with traditional school leaver students whereas the part time learners are normally exclusively studying with other mature students.

The part time students who added additional comments often referred to the fact that they were working away from what they considered the main student body in their institution:

“*Part time courses can be quite separated from general student activities creating segregation.”* [C15, PT, Q2]

*“There is no support available to part time students, classes are in the evening and at weekends… the student union doesn’t take up any of our issues because we are not full time students which leaves us in a vulnerable position.”* [C25, PT, A2]

The sense of isolation is evident from these phrases, even a sense of alienation perhaps. This theme emerged from the full time students also but there was something more painful in the comments that were gathered from this group.

*“Some students in my class ignore me.”* [C21, FT, Q2]

*“Bullying is an issue.*”[C23, FT, Q2]

*“Slight social awkwardness around younger students (may be my own insecurity though).”* [C24: FT, Q2]

*“I have a hard time connecting with the younger students.”* [C84, FT, Q2]

*“Feeling very overwhelmed right now and don’t know who to talk to…”*

[C83, FT, Q2]

Reading these comments was very difficult as it really illustrates the phenomenon of being alone in a room full of people. While the literature clearly indicates that mature students often feel vulnerable about returning to education it is upsetting to realise that that vulnerability continues when they are attending further education also. Furthermore such feelings of isolation are likely to impact on the student’s ability to succeed. “If a student feels that they do not *fit* in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate… they may be more inclined to withdraw early” (Thomas, 2002: 431). These comments are a stark reminder of the segregation that can and does occur between mature learners and their school leaver classmates. While some of that segregation would appear to be imposed on the mature learners, it would appear that there are also those who would quite happily segregate themselves from the school leavers if possible, as they find the other learners barely tolerable!

*“Adapting to the D4 kids has proven very difficult but now I’ve realised that I am nearly 40 and a little wiser…so I make allowances for their condescending attitude.”* [C52, FT, Q2]

*“Tolerance is low towards younger students.”* [C16, FT, Q2]

*“I found a lot of the younger students very hard to tolerate.”* [C117, FT, Q2]

Some of the part time respondents also reported that they were studying online and therefore felt that interaction with other students was not of relevance to them.

Based on this data it would appear that the part time students may have felt isolated to some extent but it seemed to affect them more on a practical rather than emotional level, whereas for the full time learners it would appear that the interaction with other students had a more personal affect either through reported feelings of isolation and/or frustration. It is important to reiterate however, that the majority reported very positive experiences with the other students.

**4.3.1.1 Integration with other learners**

Respondents were also asked specifically about how they felt they had integrated with other learners. The qualitative findings in this section are very closely aligned to the findings in 4.3.1 ‘Interaction with other students’ and many of the selected quotations could be interchangeable. Students did have some specific concerns in terms of integration and some had concerns around working with other students.

*“Projects with students I didn’t know.”* [C29, FT, Q4]

*“Working in groups, people not doing their bit.”* [C43, FT, Q4]

*“Mature students are a lot more competitive with each other.”* [C50, FT, Q4]

There was also evidence that some respondents felt that their age was of concern to them and in some cases they felt it was affecting their ability to integrate with other learners.

*“I found difficulty in interacting with others in the class because I was older.”* [C85, FT, Q4]

*“My age in relation to other students (40+).”* [C88, FT, Q4]

During the interviews, much of the discussion around other students was centred on interactions as part of group work. Even though Emma had enjoyed the social side of group work, she believed there were people who had been carried by their group members, and Mary had learned how to avoid being the one to carry others.

*“There was another girl from Dublin that eh… like that she’s a blonde… you know flutter the eyelids at all the group that had the lads in it… every single project she ended up with a different project because nobody wanted her because she wouldn’t show up!”* (Emma, PT)

*“…you kind of learn in first year who not to work with…”* (Mary, FT)

*“Some of them are willing to work and some you have to keep pushing and shoving to do anything…”* (Betty, PT)

Freddie reported feeling quite separate from the main student body due to his focus on achieving his goals. He found some aspects of group work frustrating and believes his maturity helped him to cope with those feelings.

*“I suppose I didn’t get involved in the day to day… okay you use the canteen and that… you don’t get the activities or the social activities… it’s more about getting your work done … you sort of feel a bit separate from the other students.”*  (Freddie, FT)

*“There’s always fellas slacking off… but like you have that… one or two of the group were a bit peeved really like feck it you’re going to have to do it anyway… you just learn to get on with people after a while… you might have gone off the handle a few years ago but (laughs)…*  (Freddie, FT)

David was studying his course online and as such had no physical interaction with his classmates after their induction, he felt some support from their online interactions but generally felt he was working on his own and was conscious of the age difference between him and the other students. When asked if he felt some support from the others he responded,

*“I think I did but… I did but I eh… personally myself I was organised so you know so… I would like… I suppose that comes maybe from working in industry…”*  (David, PT)

*“I always felt a little bit older so maybe eh… I felt a little bit more independent.”* (David, PT)

Darragh had experience of working with younger adults and felt that this had helped him to interact well with the younger students in his class and he experienced great camaraderie among his group.

*“Oh everybody helps… even going to assignment level if you’ve got an assignment or something and you’re doing somebody will come over if you are stuck…”*  (Darragh, FT)

He also described how he was one of those who was able to offer help to fellow classmates and he appeared to have enjoyed that experience of helping others.

*“I know there was other young ones… like today my whole database class I was going round setting up servers for everybody in the class… they were panicking because it wasn’t working… “* (Darragh, FT)

Emma also reported a great rapport between her and the other students, but did specify that the average age in her class was quite mature. She also echoed Freddie in saying that her group were quite isolated from the other students in the college, but she appeared to feel this was a positive rather than a negative fact.

*“…the best class I’ve ever been in as regards camaraderie…everyone helps out everyone…we just all help one another out… I’d say the average age is late thirties, early forties… so we’re all in the same place.”*(Emma, PT)

*“We had our own room, we had a kettle and all down the back (laughs)… … which then I suppose kind of isolated us from the college a little bit... but there was one class this year that was in with second years and to be honest I’m glad it was no more…”* (Emma, PT)

Gary believes that he integrated well with the other students and believed there was a great community spirit in his course not just within his year but between the various years also.

*“Well that [integration with classmates] was probably down to my character as well, you know I’d integrate anywhere.”*  (Gary, FT)

Again, he pointed out that most of his classmates were of a similar age to him and he expressed concern that he would not have been as happy or as supported if he had been integrated with younger learners.

*“Because I couldn’t go to an 18 or 19 year old and say could you show me how to do this because their teaching methods, the methods they were taught under were quite different from mine…it would possibly just confuse you further*” (Gary, FT)

*“…the young student can only see as far as his nose and the world is his oyster and you know, there’s no fear in him… that youthfulness, you know… there is no danger and you know… devil may care attitude…”* (Gary, FT)

Mary definitely was aware of the different level of diligence that she was displaying relative to the younger students in her class and described how she tended to associate with the other mature learners more.

*“I find a lot of young people here… that don’t take it seriously at all… and they still seem to pass their exams… they all tell me I’m a nerd because I’m in the library studying.”* (Mary, FT)

*“…there’s four mature and there’s the three mothers are the three of the mature students and we’re very close and we stick together and now we do get on great, I love everybody in the class… but we’d be the ones… we’d always be in…”* (Mary, FT)

Sarah found that the other students were a great help to her when it came to learning about electronic databases and finding information in online journals, which were skills she felt she was lacking. While her classmates seemed happy to help she did feel at times that she was an inconvenience for them.

*“I had to kind of… seek out help yourself via friends and stuff… to see you know if somebody could help me or not… I was kind of badgering classmates.”* (Sarah, PT)

Tina felt like she was the mother of the class, she was the oldest student in the class and the youngest was a year older than her youngest child. She believed she integrated very well and the other students never made her feel as though she was any different, however, she was still aware of the age difference and appeared to be grateful that she was not undertaking the course to make good friends with similar interests.

*“I was like literally, without using the wrong expression but like the mammy in the class… but I wasn’t treated as such…”* (Tina, FT)

*“I think if you went in thinking I’m going to… make lots of new friends… you could have a little bit of a, not a disappointment, but you might be in for a bit of a reality check. Essentially you are a different age group a different generation.”*(Tina, FT)

*“Boogying about in [name of nightclub] at three o’clock in the morning, just to fit in with a group of people who are my classmates… eh, no! (laughs).”* (Tina, FT)

**4.3.2 Interaction with lecturing staff**

The majority of all respondents reported having a very positive experience in relation to lecturing staff, 69% of full time and 60% of part time students. None of the part time students reported a very negative experience and but 9% of respondents from the full time cohort did. However, the following quotation from a part time learner implies some level of dissatisfaction with their lecturers.

*“Lecturing staff… need to be more open regarding the views, suggestions made by mature students. They need to acknowledge the students contribution to the discussion in a positive manner”* [C13, PT, Q2]

Of course this student is entirely right in suggesting that student contributions should be acknowledged in a positive manner, however, this does not mean that the lecturer should always agree with or implement views or suggestions made by individual learners. Every effort should be made to create a safe and positive learning environment which encourages contribution by the student but the onus is still on the lecturer to ensure that equal opportunity is given to all students and that learning outcomes are being met. There was a common thread of comments which suggested that most lecturing staff were very good, but there were some who were not reaching the standards expected by the learners.

*“Most lecturing staff are great, but some not so good.”* [C26, FT, Q2]

*“All lecturing staff are very helpful with the exception of one.”* [C68, FT, Q2]

Interestingly a number of respondents expressed an opinion that lecturing staff should be dealing with mature students in a different way than they deal with younger students in the class.

*“Some staff are fine to deal with other lecturers seem to be too used to dealing with young and inexperienced students.”* [C31, FT, Q2]

*“With my experience, lecturers who have previously only dealt with school leavers have had difficulty in dealing with mature students, unsure how to assert themselves in particular instances. Also, in treating mature learners as equals teacher may divulge too much…”* [C58, FT, Q2]

*“… staff can empathise with the stress of juggling full-time education and family responsibilities.”* [C126, FT, Q2]

There was one response that was particularly negative in terms of lecturer support but the author themselves does admit to failing their course which may have tainted their experience.

*“I got no support and no help from the lecturers they were very negative and not encouraging at all I have failed my course and feel very demoralised and a low self esteem as a result.”* [C27, FT, Q2]

Either way whether it was lecturer incompetence or student inability it is very disappointing when a mature learning experience results in such negative feelings, the complete opposite of what educators and policy makers are trying to do by encouraging mature learners to participate in further and higher education. Notably while there appears to be an expectation of being treated differently, it is important for the lecturer to maintain their professional self and academic standards when dealing with students, regardless of their age or life experience.

**4.3.3 Interaction with mature learner support services**

Both full and part time majorities reported a neutral experience in relation to mature learner support services; 36% full time and 35% part time. Unfortunately this may be symptomatic of the phrasing of the question rather than their actual opinion. Despite the intention to avoid ambiguous language in the questionnaire, it would appear from the data that there was either some confusion among participants as to what was meant by mature learner support services or it could be a lack of knowledge that such supports exist at the IoTs.

*“I’m not aware of any mature learner support services for part time students.”* [C14, PT, Q2]

*“Didn’t know of any mature learner support.”* [C19, PT, Q2]

*“Didn’t know there was a support service”* [C19, FT, Q2]

*“Have never heard or seen mature learner support services in college…”* [C33, FT, Q2]

*“What supports?”* [C61, FT, Q2]

“*What mature learner support services?”* [C89, FT, Q2]

*“Do mature learner support services exist?”* [C112, FT, Q2]

*“Was not aware of them until last month and I am in 3rd year.”* [C118, FT, Q2]

*“Wasn’t even aware of a mature learner support service.”* [C134, FT, Q2]

While the data cannot be classified by institution, it is likely that respondents in cells that are close together are from the same institution as the responses are logged by date of completion and the survey link was issued to various institutes on different dates. As evident from the quotations above, the lack of information about mature learner supports ranges throughout the cell numbers so this would indicate that it is a problem across the board for both full and part time students. Some respondents were very clear that more needs to be done to make students aware of the available supports:

*“There does not seem to be mature learner support services at [name of IT], if there are, they are VERY poorly advertised.”* [C69, FT, Q2]

*“I have not had cause to access support services but if I need to have limited knowledge as to how they could help me… more communication on what supports are available.”* [C79, FT, Q2]

When neutral responses are removed, the most common response among full time learners was that their experience with mature learner supports were very positive but for the part time learners it was reported as being somewhat positive. It is beyond the scope of this data to determine whether the somewhat positive is based on the actual interaction with learner support services or if it is based on an inability to access such supports. There were mixed comments from students who had accessed the supports also, but more positive than negative responses were recorded among full time students.

*“Mature induction week gave a good maths intro.”* [C25, FT, Q2]

“*I did complete the mature school which was worthwhile to complete.”* [C109, FT, Q2]

*“I initially attended the mature student group during my first week but found it offered very little of any use to me.”* [C119, FT, Q2]

*“Summer school excellent.”* [C135, FT, Q2]

There were no qualitative responses from part time students who had used support services.

**4.3.4 Previous experience**

Some of the interviewees had previously attended further or higher education facilities or had undertaken professional qualifications and they felt that their previous educational or work experience was of benefit when coming to their current programme of study.

*“I’ve been through the mill twice before this, that it’s become second nature now… I won’t say the rules of the game but you know the way things work out like…”* (David, PT)

*“Like coming from a background that I’m used to I suppose studying for exams like, you know… it stood to me in that score.”* (Freddie, FT)

*“I did a level 5 in youth and community work… I guess that helped massively doing that… I had a better understanding of different subjects and having to do assignments and presentations… well it helped anyway.”* (Sinead, FT)

*“I kind of had 15 years nursing addiction experience, so I had something to compare to in my mind… you know if you do a course that you have some knowledge and experience on it’s not all totally new.”* (Sarah, PT)

*“…when I worked in local government I did my certificate and diploma in local government studies part time while I was working and while my children were very small.”* (Tina, FT)

For some it was simply a matter of the maturity that comes with age which was helpful.

*“All that comes with a life experience you get more prepared for things…*” (Darragh, FT)

*“Compared to my undergraduate years, I felt you know I was more mature now, I would apply myself more, I’d be more focussed.”*(David, PT)

For others they felt that their previous experiences were of little use or in some cases were actually a disadvantage.

*“…when I was in school as a young boy we didn’t even have calculators back then we were sort of using the abacus… then you come into a third level degree like this and you’re doing specialised mathematics like you’re doing algebra… it can be quite daunting.”* (Gary, FT)

*“If you’ve been out of the system for a good while and you’re going back as a mature student and you know we have the usual from school days… being told… if you can’t answer the question straight away… you must be stupid… There’s a lot from the old teaching methods that are going to haunt us.”*  (Emma, PT)

**4.3.5 Personal relationships**

Many of the students were concerned about the impact their role as a mature learner was having on their personal relationships and the most common relationship that was mentioned was that of the parent and child. Many of the respondents felt that they were missing out on time with their children.

*“I am a mother of a special needs child too and I have to skip classes in evening to be home in time for bus as he is at special school…”*[C4, PT, Q4]

*“Childcare and the feeling of not being there for kids.”* [C31, FT, Q4]

*“Being away from home during placement.”* [C51, FT, Q4]

There was a recurrent use of the words ‘juggle’ and ‘juggling’ which really gives a good indication of the frame of mind that the mature learners are enduring. The use of this word in particular indicates a feeling of always being on the edge, only just making it happen and always fearing that the balance will slip and ruin the performance. There is no comfort when you are juggling, never a moment to relax or let your concentration lapse.

*“Trying to juggle full time working with part time study and maintain a home life as a mother and wife.”* [C7, PT, Q4]

*“Financially very difficult and trying to juggle college and kids and family life very difficult.”* [C19, FT, Q4]

*“Juggling a teenager, home and study.”*[C44, FT, Q4]

*“Juggling course work with two small children and ensuring I spent enough time with them…”* [C58, FT, Q4]

*“Juggling family life with study time.”* [C68, FT, Q4]

*“It was hard to juggle a newborn as a lone parent, crèche, commuting, finances, work and study.”* [C93, FT, Q4]

There were many incidences where the longing to have more time with children was expressed, but there was even one student who was considering having a family and was concerned about the impact this would have on their study.

*“Concerns around starting a family and remaining in my course.”* [C33, FT, Q4]

Ideally having a family and studying should not be mutually exclusive, but the reality is often far from the ideal. It would be very disappointing to lose a student who had committed to their own education due to their decision to have a family. The decision to have a child is often time sensitive particularly for the female student, unlike study which can be undertaken at any age, but the student is probably more likely to experience even greater time pressure and guilt associated with work life balance if returning to education shortly after starting a family.

**4.3.6 Life balance**

Finding the balance between college life and life outside was presenting a challenge for some interviewees and the reasons why the balance was difficult varied from one student to the next. Betty was juggling college with a part time job and caring for her child with autism which was not only time consuming but also exhausting. When asked if she ever felt like she was missing out by not being there enough for her son, she was clear that he was the priority and everything else had to be arranged around him.

*“Just to keep up with the work, especially when you have a child… you’d have a lot of work to do in the evenings and sometimes I’d be at it the whole weekend like whenever I’d get him to bed I’d be sitting up for hours… and you’d be so tired going to work then.”* (Betty, PT)

*“Other times you’d be so tired and you just don’t want to get out of bed, but you have to… so it’s just you either can pick to have a happy child, to have good grades or to have a clean house… you can’t have everything.”* (Mary, FT)

*“You’re doing a project and you’re trying to work like… it’s very hard to concentrate on that and work aswell… plus the fact that I’m commuting… you’re not inclined to look at anyway… pretty knackered anyway.”* (Freddie, FT)

Darragh focussed on ensuring he used every available minute during the college days to try to get his extra work done, in an attempt to keep evenings and weekends for his part time job and spending time with his family. He felt his experience as a chef, working in a highly pressurised environment, has equipped him well to manage his time, but at this point he cannot take any day off in the week.

*“…one of the guys asked us at the end of it… what else could we do next year to make the student eh… make it more interesting for yous and his suggestion was teach everyone juggling(laughs).”* (Darragh, FT)

Gary felt that he was fortunate that his family were at a stage in life where they were reasonably independent and able to manage their own affairs.

*“All my children are more or less grown up… the youngest now is 17… so you don’t have to worry about it if you’re not there to a dinner… they’re pretty disciplined at being able to manage their own affairs…”* (Gary, FT)

But there are other aspects of Gary’s life that have had to be put on hold. Similar to Gary, Sinead did not have the difficulty of juggling a family with college life but she still had to make a conscious effort to ensure that there was a balance in her life.

*“There’s no… out socialising in the evenings in the pub… there’s no… I have to go and get the gardening done at the weekend… there’s jobs, chores around the house, everything is put on the long finger and it’s totally down then onto studying and that’s it.”* (Gary, FT)

*“…time management would have been an issue of trying to balance my own youth work…where you are volunteering and stuff like that, and home like, you know, spending time with people, not letting college overtake every conversation.”* (Sinead, FT)

**4.3.7 Assessments**

For a number of students assessments were a cause for concern; for some it was the content of the assessments or time pressure associated with it and for others it was being asked to work with other students.

*“Group work can be frustrating and projects can be patronising when designed to simulate the ‘real world’.”* [C136, FT, Q2]

*“Being told to take part in group projects not ideal what with work and family and being part time student.”* [C12, PT, Q2]

*“The 100% exams are a huge concern as exams were never my forte, I prefer the continuous assessment approach or 50% exam 50% assignment.”* [C37, FT, Q4]

*“Not knowing if I am handing up what lecturers want when it comes to assignments.”* [C57, FT, Q4]

*“Exam stress with January exams and working part time over xmas in a late bar, no time off 2 study* [sic].*”* [C80, FT, Q4]

*“…workloads became unmanageable…Lack of communication between lecturers which was the problem as none of them realised the others were piling on the work simultaneously.”* [C97, FT, Q4]

The students were asked generally about the type of assessments that they were required to complete as part of their course and how they felt about the assessments. Some of their comments related to the assessments themselves and some related to the process of group work which was required for many of the continuous assessments that they had undertaken.

**4.3.7.1 Continuous assessments**

Some of the students expressed a preference to work alone when it came to assessments and they preferred individual working than group assessments. While others believed that group assessment reduced the overall pressure.

*“Well to be honest I think in a group it’s less stress on people.”* (Betty, PT)

*“We were working in groups a lot of it was group type projects em… made it more sociable.”* (Emma, PT)

*“I was working on my own for each of them… I don’t mind it because… you were on your own really.”* (David, PT)

Darragh had expressed his displeasure to his lecturer at having to work with people in a group who were not willing to put in the same amount of work as him when he was in first year but he was satisfied with the lecturer’s resolution and would happily work in a group again.

*“I mentioned it to [lecturer name] in fairness, he split us up and gave everybody… everybody had one person that they didn’t want! (laughs)”* (Darragh, FT)

*“If you’re doing group you need four or five… the lazy lugs can get spread around!”* (Emma, PT)

Freddie focussed on the opportunity to learn from your peers when involved in group work

*“…people have different ideas… I suppose it opens up your mind a bit more because you’re only seeing what you can think of and somebody else then… think I never thought of that like… it was interesting…”* (Freddie, FT)

However, he too had experienced the loafers

*“… there’s always fellas slacking off… doing nothing at all (laughs)… people complain about that like, that they are carrying a person in the group… you’re always going to have that…”* (Freddie, FT)

In fact, Freddie was even honest enough to admit that there might be times when he is perceived as the slacker!

*“…well sure, some day you might be feeling rough and you mightn’t be great in a group yourself (laughs)…”* (Freddie, FT)

Gary believed that the continuous assessments were fair and that students were given sufficient time to prepare.

*“… the assessments were fair enough…you were given… time to research and develop your skills that you needed for that particular CA.”* (Gary, FT)

In Gary’s course all of the assessments were individual and he was pleased about that.

*“… if I had to work with a group of three people and I’m putting all the work in and I’m being held back because them other two people aren’t doing their work … it would put even more undue pressure on me and would be unfair on me for the overall mark then.”* (Gary, FT)

Mary believed that the continuous assessments deserved a higher weighting than exams as they required much more effort and the exam was just a memory exercise.

*“… the continuous assessment you are putting things together over a few weeks and like they should be worth more, you do put a lot of work into them… [in exams] all you are doing is memorizing… go in and put down as much as you know and you get marked on that, which is a bit silly I think.”* (Mary, FT)

Tina also preferred continuous assessment to examination as she felt it offered her the opportunity to review the work and perfect as much as possible.

*“I probably prefer a written assignment because I’d be a little bit of a perfectionist and I like to keep going back and revisiting it and revisiting it, and polishing it up… I enjoy academic writing… that’s an awfully gruesome thing to say… good job this is confidential! (laughs)”* (Tina, FT)

Sinead believed that she had carried people who were not contributing to the group, but felt that there really was no alternative.

*“I was in another group with another girl and she didn’t do basically anything… so I said, look at, I’m going to go ahead and do this… it’s not that I was going ahead I just needed to get a decent CA on it…”* (Sinead, FT)

Sinead also felt that the scheduling of continuous assessment was an issue as they all seemed to fall due at the same time which was putting undue pressure on the students.

*“… oh they all come up at the one time, they are all in April!”* (Sinead, FT)

**4.3.7.2 Examinations**

The interviewees’ sentiments relating to assessments varied quite significantly. For Betty the final exams were fraught with nerves; however the actual experience of taking the exam was not as bad as expected.

*“… you just get very nervous, especially the older you get I think, like I’d have the butterflies in my stomach when it comes to exams… you’d just be sitting for days in advance trying to study and learn bits and you thought you were getting nothing in… but then when you come to the time you know, you put the pen to paper, you know, you’re able to write a good bit.”* (Betty, PT)

Other students felt that the exams did not need to be feared, and some looked forward to getting them out of the way, and had high expectations about their performance.

*“I don’t find them as hard… I was really afraid of them for the Leaving Cert… I can’t wait to start studying next week… to get them out of the way. I do try to keep over seventy… I do try….”* (Mary, FT)

*“I actually found that in exams I did quite well and I mean I would have kind of crammed for the week before… then I just … kind of pour out my brain… and I seemed to do alright.”* (Sarah, PT)

Darragh found that the time constraints associated with assessments were most stressful. He preferred submitting continuous assessments and felt he performed best in those assessments, but timed practical exams were his greatest challenge.

*“When I actually get a time constraint I normally get a wee bit flustered…”* (Darragh, FT)

For Freddie one of his subjects was difficult but by and large he was able to cope well in the exam situation.

*“… the exams in the other areas I didn’t find too bad like…”* (Freddie, FT)

Gary felt that there was very little time to prepare for the examinations because the continuous assessments ran right up until the week before the final exams were due to start.

*“…usually the CAs are geared around the exams… the type of questions that will be asked… but again poorly managed… from lecturers not realising… I’m going to have to give you three CAs here and they’re due a week before the exam… and like if you can’t study or revise, that’s your problem.”* (Gary, FT)

David had previously studied to PhD level, but had never before encountered open book examinations, for him old habits die hard and even though the students were legitimately allowed to consult the course materials he preferred to challenge himself.

*“I tried to stay away from opening the books I tried to do it from memory.”* (David, PT)

Emma on the other hand embraced the open book concept and she believed it was a much better method of assessment than traditional rote learning for examinations

*“…it teaches you, okay well, how can I find this information on the spot under time pressure, you know… I found it a brilliant concept because it actually teaches you… sorry it assesses your understanding…”* (Emma, PT)

**4.3.8 Current or future employment**

There were a number of students who had concerns about either finding work now or on completion of their course. This is not surprising given the economic environment in which this research was undertaken as many mature learners had returned to college on government sponsored initiatives such as Springboard which aimed to improve employability.

*“That after graduation I may still not be able to gain employment.”* [C27, FT, Q4]

*“Employment after graduating.”* [C35, FT, Q4]

*“The opportunities available on successfully completing my course.”* [C64, FT, Q4]

*“Gaining employment after completion of course.”* [C78, FT, Q4]

*“No job.”* [C98, FT, Q4]

*“The ability to adapt once again in the educational system and the personal pressure one places to succeed and have a job opportunity at my stage in life.”* [C13, FT, Q2]

The expectation and hope for future employment was discussed by a number of the interviewees also, and generally they were feeling positive in terms of their employability after completion of their courses.

*“I’m content where I am at the minute but down the line once he [son] gets a bit bigger I would like to move somewhere, I would like to manage and everybody always tells me that I’d be very good at it.”* (Betty, PT)

*“It’s been a positive experience… hopefully worthwhile as regards… you know… what the media says it’s not as easy getting a job even in IT as they make out…* (Emma, PT)

When asked about his motivation for undertaking his computer science course Freddie, a redundant but fully qualified accountant, explained that finding work was the main factor.

*“Well I had an interest in it but it was thinking more that the government seemed to be pushing that… there seemed to be jobs in IT.”* (Freddie, FT)

Gary also found himself with skills that were not required in the current market.

*“I had to re-skill because of the economy… my job skills was cheffing and lorry driving and so there’s no work in that areas, so just agreed to get reskilled, re-educated just to get employment.”* (Gary, FT)

There was a happy outcome for Gary, as when he was verifying the data from his interview he informed the researcher that he is now employed in the information communications technology sector as a result of his return to education.

Sinead felt that employment was unlikely even on completion of her course, but she was choosing not to worry about that just yet. She had chosen to take a place on this course because it was of interest to her and she was in receipt of social welfare payments and figured it was just a matter of time before she would be placed on a course, so wanted to undertake a course that interested her.

*“I hear, oh, there’s no work in youth work and there’s no job and they are cutting this, this and this, but I’m not actually focusing right now on a job.”* (Sinead, FT)

**4.3.9 Physical and emotional wellbeing**

Some students expressed concerns about their physical and emotional wellbeing, and for some the main concerns they had were based on personal circumstances rather than their pursuit of an education. The mature learner experience offered some students an insight into themselves and their ability to cope in difficult circumstances.

*“Personal issues outside college.”* [C18, FT, Q4]

*“Health and mobility issues.”* [C28, FT, Q4]

*“I had some concern about the stress levels I would be putting myself under, as I am not the most confident of people, but I have been pleasantly surprised at how well I have coped.”* [C62, FT, Q4]

*“Because I am a mature student and work very hard, I was afraid of burning out.”* [C63, FT, Q4]

*“Got married, had two children, diagnosed a celiac all by year 3.”* [C69, FT, Q4]

*“How would I react to being challenged by lecturers and students because I was not used to being challenged too often at work.”* [C84, FT, Q4]

For Gary and Sinead things were different to how they expected them to be and this was a cause for concern. Uncertainty seemed to be a source of stress and having to adapt was proving a little difficult.

*“It can be quite daunting, so, you know, the expectations, you know I wasn’t expecting it to be that difficult…it was 30 years ago I was at school and the auld brain isn’t as spongy as it used to be… so that was quite worrying as to whether I’d be capable for it or not.”* (Gary, FT)

*“Since the last time I was in college… everything is on the Internet now… I’m fine with it now, but that was a major thing actually, that was one of the major things.”* (Sinead, FT)

Sarah was recovering from a long term health condition and this was her main source of concern, she was worried that the physical impact attending college could have on her.

*“..concerns about driving into college, it was only about 40 or 50 minutes… I kind of discussed with them the potential issues…different concerns probably than, as you say, the typical student but still em… looking at a balance, I certainly didn’t want my health to deteriorate.”* (Sarah, PT)

**4.3.10 Experience of self**

Some of the students discussed how the experience of being a mature learner revealed some of themselves that they may not have been aware of prior to this experience.

*“You can’t have it all your own way all the time (laughs) I’m quite in touch with my control freak side…”*  (Tina, FT)

*“One thing I find about myself I’m very competitive.”* (Mary, FT)

**4.4 Quality of the education provision**

In order to consider the quality of the education provision it is important to know why the mature learners engaged in higher education. Their satisfaction or otherwise with the quality of the education will most likely be linked to the extent to which they feel their experience has helped them achieve their initial objective.

**4.4.1 Reasons for study**

Various reasons for returning to education were expressed by the interviewees, some reported that this was something that they had always wanted to do and somehow the opportunity had presented itself.

*“…a leaflet came in about the course and I decided… why not try it ‘cause I never got any degree or nothing when I was younger and I wanted to go back and just start and do something with myself…”*(Betty, PT)

*“I like computer science and there is great opportunities in it… I… had an ok leaving… well pretty alright…I think I could have got into Trinity at the time…I didn’t do a thing, didn’t do a tap actually…”*(Darragh, FT)

*“I left school when I was young and didn’t do my Leaving Cert… I was getting less hours [at work] and I decided at that point that I wanted to go back and do something in college…”* (Mary, FT)

*“I hadn’t planned to but… I was overcoming a long term disability… it just kind of fitted in and that’s why I’m doing it part time… I suppose [it] helped me as part of my rehabilitation physically and stuff.”* (Sarah, PT)

*“I said… I better fill in my CAO, just in case, [she would be made redundant]and then wasn’t but by the time I did all the process then I really did want to go back to college… it was also the year I turned 40, so it was just one of those sort of moments, you know!”* (Tina, FT)

Others were students who simply were in higher education to try to improve their employability.

*“Having this thing is not going to be any load on me… it’s going to probably help my CV anyway, you know…”* (Freddie, FT)

*“I had to reskill because of the economy...just agreed to get reskilled, re-educated just to get employment.”* (Gary, FT)

*“I just felt it was the right kinda thing to do. I had never been to college, so I decided to give it a go… on the dole too long… I’ve always wanted to go to college… so I think the timing was right.”* (Sinead, FT)

Finally some were post graduate students who had decided to further their education.

*“I just wanted a background in health and safety… I didn’t have anything in that area… for a personal benefit, I’m out of education for a while now and… I wanted to do something in education again.”* (David, PT)

*“I suppose I wanted to go into the research… I just got the opportunity to do it and I had been looking at it for about five years.”* (Emma, PT)

It is important to note that the various reasons were not necessarily mutually exclusive, for some it was a combination of factors that prompted their decision.

**4.4.2 Quality of lecturing staff**

There were a number of comments recorded from the full time learners which expressed grave dissatisfaction and concerns with some lecturing staff, and some were more descriptive than others.

*“Bad lecturers.”* [C20, FT, Q4]

*“Not happy with particular lecturer, didn’t seem to know here stuff, felt very angry about this.”* [C36, FT, Q4]

*“Dealing with issues of poor performance and availability of lecturers.”*

[C82, FT, Q4]

Broadly speaking the experience of lecturing staff was reported as being positive, but there were exceptions.

*“…the lecturers now have been brilliant and they’ve helped me in any way they can… a lot of them were very good, there were one or two that I just couldn’t kind of pick up on… they were very good and very helpful.”*  (Betty, PT)

*“I have to say they were very helpful and very considerate I think they were very understanding… they gave lots of examples that people would come in contact with their daily lives so that actually helps to reinforce the lecture.”* (David, PT)

*“Apart from one say… but say every lecturer that I’ve had was more than good… they are going way beyond the call of what you would expect from a lecturer.”* (Darragh, FT)

*“The lecturers were fine like you know… anything you wanted they would give you a hand like… some lecturers were better than others.”* (Freddie, FT)

*“You know they seem very focussed on helping you and guiding you along and encouraging you to do what you need to do…*”(Gary, FT)

Emma and Mary reported having had both extremes of lecturer.

*“We had such good lecturers… I suppose we were very lucky in that we got amazing… well one particular, our Java lecturer [name] I’ve never met the like of him…the guy is a genius at teaching he really makes the most complicated things easy.”* (Emma, PT)

*“…there was one and lovely lovely girl but it was her first year teaching… she did the old style with the slides and the lecture and then walking around helping us… I’m not being funny but I says all I’ve learned how to do is copy and paste…”* (Emma, PT)

*“There’s two now… I don’t want to mention their names… but I don’t think they’re teaching us the way they should be teaching us… so that’s one thing that annoyed me a wee bit.”* (Mary, FT)

*“One of my lecturers then… we’ve had her since first year and we’ve had her for a couple of different subjects… and she is just brilliant…she really does help and she gives you everything you need.”* (Mary, FT)

**4.4.3 Teaching and learning**

There were concerns expressed in relation to the process of teaching and learning. Some referred to the approach being taken by lecturers or course structure, while others expressed concern in terms of the student’s own ability to learn.

*“Learning to learn is not great – irrelevant.”* [C3, PT, Q4]

*“Too much content over a short period.”* [C6, PT, Q4]

*“I was concerned if the material that was on offer in the course was about the studies that I signed up for in the first place, as a result of what we have covered so far I am a little disappointed, so my concerns were correct.”* [C16, FT, Q4]

For some of the interviewees interaction with the lecturer was one of their preferred ways of learning. This was particularly true for David who was taking an online course. He preferred the live online lectures to those that had been pre-recorded.

*“…there was more interaction… but definitely with where… there was more interaction there because questions could be asked, responses were given, or the lecturer themselves would actually post a question and get you thinking…I preferred the interactive lecture”*  (David, PT)

There was criticism of some of the content of the courses that were being undertaken. Two of the students were particularly unhappy with modules that related to personal development. They believed that this type of course content was completely unsuitable for mature learners and they appeared to feel a little bit patronised by being asked to reflect on themselves.

*“We had to do like student development… like even the adults had to do it… which was a waste of my time anyway… I was a forty year old man… I didn’t need to start doing student development.”* (Darragh, FT)

*“Last year we had to do… personal learning and development which I think mature students shouldn’t have to do at all. I think I know what my strengths and weaknesses are and I don’t need to talk about them and keep a time log.”*  (Mary, FT)

Darragh felt that the entire content of his first semester was too easy, he felt frustrated at what he believed to be a waste of his time, and in fact he could barely describe it without getting annoyed.

*“There was credits for…you had to write eh… ah… you had to… it was blood from a… grrr…Jesus… blood from a stone… sorry… you had to… we watched a movie and you had to do a critique on it… then we went on a trip somewhere and you had to write a report on it…* (Darragh, FT)

He felt that skills such as touch typing would have been of much more use to students in his age profile. Many of the courses that were been undertaken comprised a combination of formal lectures and computer lab time or tutorial time. There was a general consensus that the real learning actually happens when you are doing the tasks, but most students did acknowledge the importance of learning the theory and methods behind the practical skills.

*“You can’t get enough lab time… it is what it’s all about… not what it’s all about, there is a lot of theory but… you can’t beat writing out the programmes… then you see the results and you see what the code is…”* (Darragh, FT)

*“It’s built both ways, 50% of it is about doing the theory and being about to do the theoretical stuff… 50% of the course is a practical course in that you are doing real… life set ups and part of the course is that you have to go and get work experience…”*(Gary, FT)

While Gary did not believe that one or other component of his course was more important he was very clear about how he feels he learns best.

*“…see I’m an old dog, you can’t teach an old dog to suck eggs… my learning method is monkey see, monkey do.”* (Gary, FT)

Similarly, Mary also feels that she learns best by doing.

*“I don’t learn by reading… I learn by doing.”* (Mary, FT)

Emma liked the concise notes that her lecturer provided and knew that there was additional reading available to expand her knowledge, but she felt the notes were important signposts for her learning.

*“It’s like anything if you’re reading too much you can’t see the wood for the trees.”* (Emma, PT)

Freddie found the time constraints were frustrating and he believed that more time was needed to learn effectively. His government funded course comprised one semester in college with lecturer contact and one semester of work experience, but he felt there was insufficient time in college and that as a student on work placement he had little to offer his employers.

*“… I would have preferred if we had actually done the year in college… rather than six months… I actually found that when I was in college I was learning more, but since I’ve gone to the work experience…it’s not as structured like as when you were in college…* (Freddie, FT)

*“…you are not going to be much use to an employer after six months of doing computer science… you are competing with people who are spending four years to get their degree in computer science, you know…”* (Freddie, FT)

Tina also had practical experience as part of her course and she was glad that she knew in advance that she would be going into the work place just six or eight weeks after starting the programme. She felt quite nervous about starting her first placement but she enjoyed it and found it a good way to learn.

*“That’s a great way to learn, very nerve wreaking for your first placement, you might as well be four never mind 40 going in on your first day because em, it’s a very new environment… that was a big challenge but very much enjoyed it…”*  (Tina, FT)

Sinead found that asking questions was an integral part of her learning process. In fact all of the students expressed confidence in asking questions when they needed clarification from their lecturers, but some of them were conscious that this might be an irritation to other students in the class.

*“While you are there and you’re listening and you’re asking questions, and if you don’t understand keep asking… I found that you just have to ask even if you feel stupid, even if it’s a stupid question… if I don’t understand I have to ask.”* (Sinead, FT)

*“…you might feel that you might be eh, well fit to talk and they might think that maybe a quieter person in the class might feel a bit… you know, that it’s always the same people answering and that kind of thing, so I’d be aware of that…”* (Tina, FT)

Furthermore, Sinead believed that her learning could have been enhanced if she had received more feedback from her lecturers. Some of them had provided very comprehensive feedback and she found this was a great way to learn.

Work placement also featured on Sarah’s course which was in the social sciences, but each student had to find their own placement and she felt this was very stressful for the students and also inappropriate given that students would effectively be cold calling looking for work in an area that requires high levels of confidentiality and trust. She enjoyed learning through discussions with her peers in addition to formal lectures.

*“They’ve [other students] got their experiences as well and you know there’s people working in the field so it just enriches em, the discussion really… theory is one thing but what happens in the real world…”* (Sarah, PT)

**4.4.4 Learner supports**

Betty was aware of a contact person for her class group and her class representative and she had been given a tour of the library when she started, but was not aware of any learner supports beyond that. She believed that guidance on how to use the e-learning system would have been very useful and she also liked the idea of having a social network for the mature learners.

*“…you’ve two different canteens there’s a wee smaller canteen for the older kind of ones like myself we’d go to instead of say the big canteen… be less noise and that.”*(Betty, PT)

David was unaware of any supports at his institute for mature learners. Darragh reported that there were no supports at his institute except for a little bit of extra maths tuition if required. When asked about the Student’s Union on campus he reported that while it was there, it is *“all about nightclubs”* (Darragh, FT). He was aware that in previous years there was a computer lab exclusively for mature students and also a lounge area, but both of these facilities are no longer available.

Emma was aware of some of the supports that were available for all students in her institute but she thought that there were many other students who were not aware that the support was available.

*“I don’t think people even realise there’s a doctor in there, there’s a nurse in there, d’ya know there’s a counsellor… I don’t know did…other students realise that these facilities are actually in that college and that they are entitled to get them if they need them”.* (Emma, PT)

Freddie was not aware of any learner supports but he and his classmates had requested extra tutorials on one subject that they were finding difficult and this was facilitated by the lecturer. Sarah likewise was unaware of any mature learner supports. She believed that additional support in terms of how to access information especially online would be useful as she felt like she was badgering classmates to help her with this task in particular.

In the institute that Gary was attending financial assistance was available for mature learners who needed extra tuition, but he did not mention any other forms of support.

*“…the lecturers themselves would not only be very helpful out of hours, but the college would also provide funds if you would need to get grinds or maybe get the teacher on side for extra classes.”* (Gary, FT)

Mary was given a mature learner pack when she started her course with information about the various supports that were available. Of particular relevance for her was the student assistance fund which helped her with childcare costs.

*“The college is great, they give me like almost half of my childcare payments… every week.”* (Mary, FT)

However, she believed that more could be done to make all of the learner supports that are available more visible. She would like to see a social area for mature learners where they could meet likeminded people during college hours.

*“...because mature students aren’t going to go over to that student’s union and sit on the couches and watch MTV…d’you know? We’d need something a little bit more mature (laughs) obviously!”* (Mary, FT)

Sinead also had a very positive experience with the learner support services, she was aware of a counselling service and was a regular user of the student learner centre where staff were available to help mature learners with various computer applications and proof reading.

*“…so I learned where their office was quite quick! (laughs”)* (Sinead, FT)

She was also aware of social facilities for mature learners but she had never had time to engage with them. Similarly Tina did not engage with any of the learner supports in her institute however she did feel well informed about them and probably indirectly benefited just from knowing there was help available if required.

*“I never had to use any of them but it was good to know that if you were having a tricky moment, you know that there is somebody there you can call on.”* (Tina, FT)

**4.4.5 Reported learner experience**

The overall the experience of being a mature learner was largely reported as being a positive one.

*“I think it was a very positive experience.”* (David, PT)

*“I love just walking around the halls…and I just feel like… it’s a really nice atmosphere here it’s a nice college and everybody’s nice and you make loads of friends… I enjoyed it.”* (Mary, FT)

*“As a mature learner… it’s been a positive experience… hopefully worthwhile…* *in general there would be no regret… it’s been very positive for me.”* (Emma, PT)

*“It’s been quite good, I’d have to say I enjoyed it…”* (Sinead, FT)

*“It was grand… I think [name of institute] is a very good institution.”* (Darragh, FT)

*“I’d have to say I enjoyed it, it’s been challenging…”* (Sarah, PT)

*“I loved it. I loved every minute of it… it’s a terrific sense of achievement, I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to be honest.”* (Tina, FT)

The reported learner experience can be more fully appreciated on reading the discussion chapter which includes hindsight reflections from the interviewees, fourteen months after these initial interviews.

**4.5 Conclusion**

The findings in this chapter reflect the reported lived experiences of the mature learners. There were a number of expected findings such as the difficulty mature students face in terms of finance, work/life balance and time management, however, as this type of study had not previously been conducted specifically in this sector we can now say with certainty that these factors affect mature learners in the IoT sector. The extent to which mature learners are under pressure cannot be overstated.

The main themes that have emerged from the findings are further explored in chapter five. Possible signs of a transformative learning experience were reported by some of the learners, even those who reported participating in education for vocational reasons. In order to further test this initial finding, a number of hindsight interviews were conducted to provide additional evidence from which the following discussion is developed. The lived experiences of mature learners that were reported in this study are reflective of the existing literature related to comparable students in other sectors particularly related to the negative aspects associated with being a mature learner. Some of the feelings of achievement and success that were reported came almost as a surprise to the students themselves. Many referred to their particular life stage, middle age which may have some significance in terms of how people can use education as a tool through which they can find their ‘true self’. Having stratified the learners according to whether they classified themselves as full or part time students, some differences in their experiences have been observed and the significance of this is advanced in the following chapter. Many of the interviewees reported having returned to education for vocational reasons which was unsurprising given the current and historical remit of the IoT sector in building human capital.

The honesty with which the participants responded is to be admired and there appears to be a similar experience for learners who are studying on full and part time course across the five IoTs that participated. Broadly speaking the experience was reported as being a positive one, but there were some issues around integrating with other learners and group work appeared to be an issue for a significant number of learners. Many of the comments that were recorded refer to the vocational aspect education and employability appears to be a top priority for many of the participants. The findings are analysed in the following discussion chapter and the findings presented here are pivotal to the recommendations that are made in chapter 6.

**5.0 Discussion**

**5.1 Introduction**

This discussion chapter seeks to analyse the findings that were presented in chapter four, using interpretive phenomenological analysis which is informed both by the literature review and my role as a lecturer of mature learners. The IPA method recognises the interpretive role of the researcher and thus the influence of my personal attitudes and experiences to the interpretation of the data is acknowledged, however, every effort was made to ensure that a balanced and measured interpretation has been applied and was met with the approval of the critical friend. As per previous sections, data drawn from the interview transcripts are attributed to the alias for the interview participant and the Excel™ cell number is used for respondents to the online survey.

Many of the extrinsic factors that are widely reported as being of concern to mature learners in the existing literature, such as financial and time pressures, were reported by participants of this research. This further validates the existing literature but does little to improve our understanding. Therefore this discussion will focus on the most interesting and unique aspects of the findings including firstly, the application of Mezirow’s transformative learning model to the narratives of the interviewees; secondly, the positive and negative aspects of the lived experience of this group of students; thirdly, the significance or otherwise of full or part time delivery of the courses and finally, the way in which mature learners are and may be classified.

**5.2 Transformative Learning**

As outlined in the literature review, Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning suggests that education and in particular the self-reflection that occurs as part of it, can lead to “significant personal transformations” (Mezirow, 1997: 7). The table which follows has been advanced from table 3 which was presented in section 2.5.4, and draws on the narrative of one of the mature learners, Gary, to trace the ten phases of transformative learning that Mezirow described. Transformative learning is taken to mean transformation of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives, including how the individuals’ view of themselves or their world has changed. Evidence of such transformative learning could include changes in attitude, circumstances and feelings as opposed to a ‘change of form’ as advocated by Newman (2012). When analysing the transcript from Gary’s interview, I was struck by the various phases of Mezirow’s transformative process that could be identified. Therefore the narrative was examined in relation to the ten phases and the evidence of each phase is presented in the last column. Having interpreted evidence of transformative learning from Gary’s narrative the decision was taken to conduct a number of hindsight interviews to determine if this phenomenon was to be found among other participants.

The following discussion related to transformative learning considers the ‘mutinous thoughts’ (Newman, 2012) against transformative learning, but comes from the perspective that transformative learning is deemed to have occurred if the individual has experienced an emotional transformation or transformation of their perspective. Evidence of such transformation is taken to include reported feelings of increased confidence, a change in attitude or outlook, a change in how one sees themselves or the world around them; in Mezirow’s words, their meaning schemes and perceptive or according the Merriam when a more developed or mature point of view replaces a previous one. The discovery of new talents, a sense of empowerment or confidence and a greater sense of self-responsibility (Boyd and Meyers, 1988; Cranton, 2000; Dirkx, 2000) are also taken as evidence of transformative learning. However, for the purpose of this research the benchmark against which transformative learning has been measured to have occurred, is ultimately, the ten phases that were advanced by Meizrow.

**5.2.1 Mezirow’s theory traced through a mature learner’s narrative**

Gary truly displayed a transformation during his time as a mature learner. Not only had his situation changed, but his approach and demeanour also changed. Initially on meeting Gary his tone was quite aggressive and curt but having spoken to him during the follow up phase he was much more relaxed and upbeat. His circumstances have changed considerably and most of it is down to his own determination and willingness to overcome difficulty and to pursue a course of action that he believed would, and ultimately did, improve his situation; a course of action that Freire would surely commend. The extracts from the interview, presented in table 13, help to demonstrate how Gary progressed through the transformative phases Mezirow outlined. Gary found himself with skills that were not required and despite fears about his academic ability and significant financial pressure he decided to undertake a college course that he believed would better position him to be successful economically, socially and personally. His resolve was concrete and in his own words “failure was not an option”, but he realised that it was a possibility and took the chance anyway to shape his own future for the better.

Mezirow (1990) argued that “by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection; reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting” (1990: 13). This research afforded the participants the opportunity to reflect on their experience as mature learners. While it was not the purpose of this research, it is hoped that participation has given those learners a deeper understanding of their experience, of themselves and their achievements. Furthermore the fact that these students volunteered to participate in this study may suggest some predisposition to self-reflection or at the very least a curious and inquisitive nature.

Perspectives for adult learners can be transformed during their education, Mezirow references the housewife who realises that the other housewives on her course do not have to rush home to cook dinner for their husbands, and this transforms her meaning schemes. In this instance Gary was able to acknowledge that he was “lucky” not to have young children, however, he was under considerable financial stress. Seeing his situation as “lucky” is likely to have been influenced by his exposure to classmates who were juggling small children with their return to education. This demonstrates how Gary’s meaning schemes have been affected by those with whom he shared his educational experience.

**Table 13: Mezirow’s ten phases of transformative learning applied to mature learner, Gary\*(full time student)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Phase** | **Mezirow’s Description of Phase** | **Application to Mature Learners** | **Evidence from Gary’s\*Interview** |
| 1 | A disorienting dilemma | Change in personal circumstances e.g. redundancy, significant birthday, government funding available | *“I had to re-skill because of the economy… my job skills was cheffing and lorry driving and so there’s no work in that area…”* |
| 2 | A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame | Regret at not having pursued education sooner, feel potential has not been filled, fear of not being adequate | *“This is my first time (at 3rd level) the last time I went to school was 30 years ago… the brain isn’t as spongy as it used to be!”*  *“That was quite worrying as to whether I’d be capable for it or not.”*  *“When I went to school as a young boy we didn’t even have eh calculators back then we were sort of using the abacus.”* |
| 3 | A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions | Examination of their place in society on a personal, economic and social level | *“I researched new jobs and that was the main category of jobs that was available in Ireland.”*  *“Just agreed to get re-skilled, re-educated just to get employment.”* |
| 4 | Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change | Relate to experience of other mature learners they may know or have observed returning to education | *“At my age I have to sort of… have an edge... whereas younger ones coming up… they get better marks out of their degrees… but I needed to get the edge so I ended up taking on two degrees, to try and get that sort of job…”* |
| **Phase** | **Mezirow’s Description of Phase** | **Application to Mature Learners** | **Evidence from Gary’s\*Interview** |
| 5 | Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions | Explore the concept of being a student again, how will personal relationships be affected, how will they integrate with other students/lecturers | *“I was quite fortunate in that way in that I don’t have any young children… all my children are more or less grown up…”* |
| 6 | Planning a course of action | Considering finance, time management, childcare, personal relationships, travel, application process | *“The financial end of it is worrying because again when you are unemployed and you’ve got a mortgage and kids to feed and all the rest of it… you’ve got the extra cost of petrol… your equipment…”* |
| 7 | Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans | Attending lectures, tutorials, self-directed learning, integrating with other students | *“Through dedication and focus I spent just eh, basically three months of last summer doing eight hours a day mathematics to try and understand and catch up…”*  *“… the course itself was very intensive…as a mature student you have to be very focussed on what you’re doing…”* |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Phase** | **Mezirow’s Description of Phase** | **Application to Mature Learners** | **Evidence from Gary’s\*Interview** |
| 8 | Provisional trying of new roles | Applying theory in laboratory practical, computer tutorials, work experience, research, undertaking assessments/exams | *“On top of that now also, we have the opportunity to do this CISCO CCNA which takes up at least another 20 hours a week… but it’s a very highly sought after exam, certificate…”*  *“50% of it is about doing the theory… 50% of the course is a practical course… you have to get work experience in an actual IT department… see how the department runs and how you integrate”* |
| 9 | Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships | Achieving learning outcomes, passing exams, gaining qualification, using skills in new setting e.g. workplace | *“What you get by having a degree and the CISCO certification you are saying to them well, yep, you’re capable of learning the specialised skill set.”* |
| 10 | A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective | Reassessment of oneself, reflecting back to phase one to review progress, determination as to how they and/or their circumstances have changed | *“Financially I have a mortgage which is, I’m going behind on… I’ve kids to support… so the whole reason for this course was employment so I need to get out and get employed this year…”*  *“I think the level of education that I’ve got has given me a chance of employment now that I didn’t have three years ago.”*  Post interview follow up revealed:  *“I gained employment within one month of passing my exams and has given me a very positive outlook going forward into my future career.”* |

(Adapted from Kitchenham, A. 2008: 105)

In Mezirow’s theory the individual is the unit of analysis when exploring transformational change. His theory is criticised for overlooking the role of context and social change in the individual’s transformation. However his theory actually presents itself as most relevant to this research, where the transformative process is traced only through the narratives of participants, therefore in this instance they are the unit of analysis. This alignment of his theory with the analysis in this research justifies using his theory above those that have been advanced by others in the field.

Subsequent to having traced Gary’s transformational phases, I sought to trace Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning through data from all of the interview transcripts. Unlike Gary’s narrative which very closely mirrors the phases outlined in the theory, when examined on a wider scale there were aspects of the theory which could be applied at various points to the various transcripts but there was no other transcript that fitted the theory to the same extent. This part of the research was very much inductive as opposed to being deductive, it was the words and phrases from the narratives that prompted the further testing rather than having sought to make the narrative ‘fit’ into a model. Ultimately the extent to which the narrative fit is somewhat subjective but the IPA method relies on the interpretation of the researcher and therefore it is my interpretation of the narratives that is used to determine whether or not they reflect the phases that Mezirow described. Phase one is presented here to give an overview of how this phase was evident in the narrative of some, but not all, of the learners.

**5.2.2 Evidence of the disorienting dilemma from the transcripts**

The first phase, the disorienting dilemma was evident for some but not all of the participants in this research, and its form varied. Sarah and Mary had significant life events that prompted their return to education.

*“I hadn’t planned to but… I was overcoming a long term disability… I suppose helped me as part of my rehabilitation…”* (Sarah, PT)

*“I got made redundant in the same week that I got pregnant…”* (Mary, FT)

However, for Emma and David there was no evidence of a disorienting dilemma; the pursuit of higher education was something they wanted to undertake as part of their own advancement, rather than as a reaction to some event. They had both previously undertaken and successfully achieved awards in higher education. For Betty, who had not previously undertaken further or higher education, it was just something that she always wanted to do.

For Darragh, Freddie, Sinead and Gary it was unmistakably the economic circumstances that they found themselves in that prompted them to study based on the perceived opportunities that it would offer. Interestingly this dilemma was one that existed on a macro level but affected these people on an individual basis. This further exemplifies the need to consider human experiences individually, as the individual response to a circumstance that affects society much more broadly is unique to the person who lives it.

*“There’s work there for chefs but the actual income that you can get for the job has dropped down dramatically… I like computer science and there is great opportunities in it…”* (Darragh, FT)

*“I was unemployed… so things were quiet and I decided I’d try a bit of extra study… there seemed to be jobs in IT.”* (Freddie, FT)

*“I’ve always wanted to go to college… I think the timing was right. Plus there was no work so sooner or later I think the dole was going to put me on some stupid course…”* (Sinead, FT)

Furthermore, Tina initially thought about returning to education due to an impending redundancy, yet when the redundancy did not occur she was so far invested in the idea of going back to college that she decided to pursue that course even though the initial ‘dilemma’ had been resolved.

*“I thought, what would I do if I was made redundant? And I said I would definitely return to full time study… by the time I did all the process then I really did want to go back to college. So, I gave up my job…”* (Tina, FT)

**5.2.3 Evidence of transformative learning more broadly**

Looking at the stories of the participants more broadly it appeared that the transformation was evident for a number of the participants. Just because the ten phases could not be exactly identified in the transcripts did not mean that a transformative experience did not take place. As the questions were not framed to search for the phases, it is possible that they may have occurred but were not captured in this research context. In order to explore this theory more deeply a number of short hindsight interviews were undertaken with four of the participants to discover what activities the learners were engaged in approximately fourteen months after the initial interview had taken place. They were then asked, on reflection, if they believed that their experience as a mature learner had changed them in any way. The other interviewees were contacted via e-mail and all but one responded with an update on their situation.

The activities of the interviewees at this stage in the research varied greatly. David was employed as a lecturer in the institute where he had studied. Sharon, Tracey and Declan were all still engaged in full time education. Mary had withdrawn from her programme the previous autumn but was planning to return to the course in the coming September. Frank considered himself unemployed, but was working one day a week in the profession he had prior to attending his college course, similarly, Emma was working but in the role that she had given up in order to return to education. Gary had gained employment as a result of his course in a related role. Betty did not respond to the contact that was made and Sarah initially said she was willing to be interviewed but failed to respond to subsequent contact.

**5.2.3.1 Students who experienced transformative learning**

As outlined previously, Gary had a transformative experience which resulted not only in a new career but also a new perspective on life. Although Darragh has not yet graduated it would appear that he too was experiencing a transformation. When asked if he felt he had changed in any way he responded:

*“Definitely…I probably have realised a lot of abilities that I let go…”* (Darragh, FT)

Darragh believed this experience had awakened a love of learning in him. He rediscovered a love of science that he had not engaged with since school and was even reading scientific books for enjoyment as opposed to part of his coursework. He believed that he had learned to be more empathetic towards others and realised that students of all ages face challenges. He believed that having overcome the *“hurdle of going back”* to higher education for the first time he would like to continue his education. He plans to study for his honours degree in the next academic year and plans to complete a Master’s degree on a part time basis afterwards. Furthermore his experience taught him to get the most out of life on a number of different levels. He is now a rugby coach and is playing golf in addition to working and studying.

*“That’s the other thing, college has got me going again, you know, you realise there’s a lot more to do in the day.”* (Darragh, FT)

Sinead did not seem to realise that she had transformed, but it was evident from the researcher’s perspective that her outlook was very different from when they had first interacted, representing a change in her meaning schema and how she views education. In the initial interview she revealed the reason she had returned to education.

*“… I think the timing was right, plus there was no work so sooner or later I think the dole was going to put me on some stupid course…”* (Sinead, FT)

It would appear from this statement that Sinead’s decision was a case of jumping into higher education before she was pushed, but now she finds herself considering further learning. When asked at this stage if she would consider additional higher education when she completes her ordinary degree next year she said,

*“Probably… yeah, I think I probably would like, there’s always something there that you could be doing to better yourself doing.”* (Sinead, FT)

This statement, particularly the reference to bettering yourself, would suggest that Sinead believes that the study she has undertaken has improved her in some way. Furthermore Sinead has gained employment as a result of her college course, despite her pessimism regarding potential employment during the initial interview. She had been completing a work placement as part of her programme and when it was finished she was offered a contract for maternity leave cover.

*“Now I’m actually getting paid for something I like doing… that doesn’t happen too often! (laughs)”*(Sinead, FT)

This indicates a major change from her language and demeanour in the initial interview when she stated:

*“No jobs, on the dole too long… so, yeah.”* (Sinead, FT)

During her hindsight interview Mary was not really aware of her transformation. When asked if she felt the course had changed her in any way, she sounded surprised at the question and was unsure how to answer.

*“Do I think it changed me? (sounds incredulous)… eh… I don’t know!... well I think it makes me realise that I can’t wait to go out and get a job! (laughs)”* (Mary, FT)

However, Mary had already identified a transformation during the initial interview when she spoke about the fact that she had become more confident and more outspoken during the course of her studies and she specifically identified that this was different to how she was before coming to college.

*“…I’d be one of the more louder people in the class… more outspoken than everybody else… always give my opinion about something… and I wouldn’t really have been like that before.”*  (Mary, FT)

Interestingly this would indicate that the transformation that occurs is perhaps so subtle and gradual that it is difficult to detect for the individual who is transforming. From the researcher’s perspective Mary had just described a transformation but when asked about it directly she was not able to identify it. Mary’s outlook on additional education had also changed but in a different way to Darragh. Initially Mary believed that she would like to be educated to Master’s level but it would appear that she was reassessing that goal and perhaps had a realisation of the level of commitment and sacrifice that is required of mature learners.

“From first year I was like… I’m going to do my Master’s and I wanted to go to Smurfit School of Business and I wanted to do this and I wanted to do that… I’m not too sure now at the moment because… I’m not sure… I’m just very confused about what I want to do…” (Mary, FT)

Also, Mary mentioned that she was feeling that she was too old (at 33 years) to change direction even though the course she was completing was different to what she had expected. This confusion and uncertainty may be symptomatic of changing meaning schemes; where the assumptions we had taken for granted become uncertain and require reassessment. Mezirow did not specify that transformative learning would always result in a positive outcome, and in this case it appears that Mary’s perspectives have changed; that in some way her naivety about higher education has been replaced with a greater understanding of the difficulty of being a mature learner. Despite this uncertainty, Mary was very definite about her commitment to this current course and knew what she did not want to happen.

*“I really really want to finish it… like I don’t ever want to say that I stopped half way through a degree…”* (Mary, FT)

The hindsight interview with Freddie was less positive than with the others and it was apparent that he felt disillusioned with the outcomes of his course. His preoccupation with the lack of employment opportunities that materialised on completion of his course made it difficult to try to establish any transformation in this individual. Having undertaken a government funded course with the view to gaining employment in a new sector, he finds himself working one day a week in his previous profession and wondering if his time would have been better spent looking for a job in that profession instead of having spent eighteen months on a course.

While Betty did not respond to the follow-up request, there was some evidence from her transcript that she had experienced a degree of transformation. Initially she returned to education with a great deal of worry around her ability to succeed but nearing the completion of her course she was planning to advance her career to progress to a management position when the timing is right for her and her family.

**5.2.4 Pattern of transformative learning**

The mature learners who had previously studied to graduate level, David and Emma did not demonstrate any great evidence of transformative learning. Also Tina who had not previously graduated, but had engaged significantly with vocational education and training throughout her career, did not overtly demonstrate a major transformation.

According to Jung, childhood does not permit the development of a self-identity as the child is too closely aligned to the psychic space of the parents to develop an ego and while he was specifically talking about the child in his writing this concept has relevance here also. Two of the ten interviewees mentioned having sought financial support from a parent when they were unable to secure funding and another was still living with her father; this is likely to impact their ability to establish and develop an adult or true self as they are still dependent on their parent(s). It cannot be conclusively determined from this research if this lack of independence impacted on the transformational aspect of their education.

Based on the data from this research, it would appear that for students who were engaging with higher education for the first time, the experience was transformative based on the interpretation of transformation outlined in section 5.2. However, for those who were returning to education after previous undergraduate and in some cases postgraduate courses there was less evidence of transformation. This would suggest that transformative learning theory is most relevant for mature learners who are embarking on their first higher education qualification but less applicable to postgraduate mature learners. Therefore it can be construed that the transformative effect of learning as a mature learner diminishes with each additional educational interaction.

**5.3 Mature learner lived experiences**

For some of the participants in this research the learning extended beyond their course content. They also learned about themselves, and in some cases it would seem were proud of how they had done. Also, there were a number of participants who outlined that they were at a stage in life where they cared less about what people think of them than they might have when they are younger and this made them more confident; especially in relation to interacting with lecturing staff.

*“I had some concern about the stress levels I would be putting myself under, as I am not the most confident of people, but I have been pleasantly surprised at how well I have coped.”* [C62, Q4, FT]

*“Pleasantly surprised that I have got this far (4th year)…”* [C66, Q2, FT]

*“You’re not worried about what you say when you get to a certain age (laughs).”* (Darragh, FT)

Some participants chose to reflect on their stage in life and specifically mentioned their age. As outlined in the methodology chapter, Jung suggests that the transition from our adult identity, which is the one we establish once separated from our parents, to our true identity or second self, normally occurs around the age of forty for men and slightly earlier for women. Interestingly virtually all references to age that were made by both the questionnaire respondents and the interviewees in this research, fit this profile.

*“I’d say the average age is nearly late thirties, early forties…“* (Emma, PT)

*“My age in relation to others (40+)”* [C88, Q4, FT]

*“It was also the year that I turned 40, so it was just one of those sort of moments…”* (Tina, FT)

*“Like, I was a forty year old man…”* (Darragh, FT)

This would strengthen Jung’s supposition that this is the age at which the individual seeks to transform into their true self, and that the process often involves education or career development.

**5.3.1** **Negative feelings described by mature learners**

It was evident from findings in relation to assessments (section 4.3.7) and teaching and learning methods (section 4.4.3) in particular that some of the mature learners felt frustration. It was especially evident when it came to the topic of personal development, as this was a module that a number of students expressed dissatisfaction with. There was a perception that this type of module might be suited to the younger student but was irrelevant to the mature individuals who had greater life and work experiences. Siedle (2011: 568) argues that the mature learner is very goal oriented and therefore will appreciate a well organised and clearly defined programme; a sentiment that was expressed explicitly by the students who were interviewed in the pilot study and which is implied by many of the respondents in this research. However, Siedle believes that mature learners should not only be involved in the learning process but also in the decisions related to course content and should have a role in running the class. This would support the notion that mature learner feedback should in some way be integrated into programme development and assessment strategies.

This type of frustration may not necessarily be negative from an educational perspective, especially if one accepts Dewey’s assertion that knowledge is based on experience and that learning occurs through simultaneously doing and suffering. Using this philosophy it would appear normal that students feel some level of discomfort or dissatisfaction during the process of education. It is important that students understand the relevance of such modules and equally important that the lecturer ensures that the module is relevant and can bring about personal development in the students who undertake it, regardless of their age or level of experience. Ensuring relevance becomes more difficult for the lecturer who is teaching a group of students who comprise both school leaver and mature learners. It is important that the communication from the lecturer is appropriate for all learners in the class.

*“Some staff have a tendency to talk to the class as though they are talking to children…”* [C81, Q2, FT]

Many of the students experienced time pressure and difficulty managing their work/life balance when studying (sections 4.2.1.2 and 4.3.6) and some learners found it a lonely experience (4.3.1). Not everyone had a positive experience and it was not always what the student had expected, either in terms of the content and structure of the course or their own ability to cope.

*“I think the mature student experience is all hype, totally overrated. I would not recommend it in general. Totally not what I expected. The majority of my fellow mature students somewhat share this opinion.”* [C78, Q2, FT]

Freddie had attended a course which he believed would increase his job opportunities but believed that he had no real chance of securing a job in the sector when competing with graduates from four year honours degree programmes. He felt “abandoned when the course was over”. The government had funded his education but he believed that more was needed to give him a real opportunity to gain employment in a new sector.

The difficulties of being a mature learner were well documented in the findings from both the survey and the interviews. Extrinsic factors such as concerns over money, time, teaching methods and assessments were mingled with internal issues like the fear of failure, managing relationship inside and outside of college, yet despite all of these issues there were many students who enjoyed the experience.

**5.3.2 Positive feelings described by mature learners**

Many of the mature learners reported very positive feelings about their experience; however, it is likely that the students who were willing to participate voluntarily in this research are among those who are coping well with the educational experience. It has been assumed that if a student is experiencing significant hardship they would have been less likely to engage in this research.

*“Have found it a very enjoyable experience.”* [C14, Q2, FT]

*“Enjoyed the learning environment.”* [C20, Q2, FT]

*“I should have went to college a long time ago…”* (Darragh , FT)

*“I’ve definitely enjoyed being a mature student and I would recommend it to anybody and anybody who’s even half thinking about it I was say, go for it.”* (Tina, FT)

Improved confidence and belief in oneself was evident from the findings and some students discussed the desire to continue their education which would indicate a positive learning experience.

*“…well never say never… I probably would go back you know…* (Betty, PT)

*“I do threaten to do Masters and things like that… I sort of say that under my breath at the moment…”*  (Tina, FT)

*“…and when I pick another course I’ll be looking to do the very same thing…”* (David, PT)

**5.4 Significance of full and part time programme delivery**

My experience of mature learners spans full and part time modes of delivery and broadly speaking I had observed that mature learners who engaged in part time study tend to develop stronger and more meaningful relationships with their classmates, while those who study full time tend to become more isolated and have difficulty in integrating into group assignments. This sections seeks to determine if the mode of delivery, namely on a full or part time basis is significant in relation to the mature learner experience.

**5.4.1 Influencing factors on full or part time participation**

The students who had experienced a significant disorienting dilemma prior to returning to education, which was related to the macroeconomic environment, all returned to education on a full time programme. Of the two interviewees who returned after a significant life event, one returned full time and one part time, but Sarah who returned part time suggested that she did this because her disability would have prohibited her from participating in a full time programme, and unfortunately this also made her ineligible for government funding.

*“I’m on a disability benefit and they only give us [financial] help when you are doing a full time course and I’m trying to explain I couldn’t do a full time course because of my health…”* (Sarah, PT)

Emma, who is classified as a part time learner, realised that her business was failing and decided to be proactive in doing a course in a sector she was familiar with, having worked in IT previously, and hoped that she would improve her employability. While her course is described as part time Emma believes this is to allow students to retain social welfare payments, given that there was twenty two hours of lectures per week over four days.

*“I did a masters in [name of university], full time, which I think was less hours…”* (Emma, PT)

The other interviewees who were studying part time did not describe any significant change in their circumstances which prompted a return to education rather it was just something they wanted to do for personal development and advancement.

*“…a leaflet came in about the course and I decided, you know… why not try it…”* (Betty, PT)

*“… for a personal benefit I’m out of education for a while now… well at the time the phrase I would have used was to exercise my brain again…”* (David, PT)

Based on these data it would appear that the students who are interested in education for personal advancement or enjoyment are more likely to undertake study on a part time basis. Whereas students who reported undertaking a course with the intention of reskilling and improving their employability are more likely to participate in a full time course. Factors like age, subject area, family or gender do not appear to influence the decision to attend on a full or part time basis for the interviewees. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether this correlation is representative of the mature learner population more broadly but is would be fair to say that for these participants, those who undertook education for vocational and employability reasons, were more likely to engage in full time education.

**5.4.2 Full and part time similarities and differences**

Broadly speaking the responses to the online survey and interview questions from full and part time students were similar. Having said that, there were some notable differences; seven times more full time than part time students reported having a very negative experience. While the overall proportion of students reporting a negative experience was very small, it was interesting to note that those attending on a part time basis were more likely to have had a positive experience. Students attending on a part time basis were more likely to feel that their class group were excluded from the wider community at the their institute of technology, but full time students were more likely to feel excluded in their own class and only full time students reported having difficulty ‘fitting in’ with their classmates. None of the mature learners studying part time reported having a very negative experience with lecturing staff, but 9% of full time students did. Interaction with mature learner supports were mostly reported as being ‘very positive’ for full time learners but only ‘somewhat positive’ for part time learners. Financial issues were of greatest concern for full time learners whereas time pressures were of greatest concern for part time learners.

**5.5 Categories of mature student**

In order to discuss individual phenomena in a broader context it is necessary to create categories that we can refer to, such as mature students or adult learners. However, the difficulty is that having such a diverse group of individuals within the category means that aspects that are relevant for some will not be relevant for others. This is particularly true when we refer to mature students, as the classification simply requires that the individual was 23 years at the time of entry to higher education. Typically when we think of the mature student we are thinking about people closer to middle age or beyond, but there are students who are classified as mature learners but have little or nothing in common with the middle aged mature learner. From Jung’s perspective the younger mature learners would be their adult selves, whereas the more mature learners are more likely to be either transitioning into or have already become their true selves.

*“I'm a young mature student @ 23 starting so ders*[sic] *not much of an age gap between other students”* [C28, Q2, FT]

It is evident even from the language and writing style used by this mature learner that they are not likely to have much in common with the older mature learner. This theme also emerged in the pilot study where one of the participants felt that she did not fit in with either her school leaver classmates or the older mature learner in her class.

*“When you are 23/24 and you are speaking with 17/18 year olds that are away from home for the first time… you’re on different wavelengths altogether.”* (Caroline, FT)

*“There was only myself and another lady, but she was in her fifties...”* (Caroline, FT)

Osborne et al., (2004: 296) suggest that there are six categories of mature learners including *delayed traditional, late starter, single parent, careerist, escapees* and *personal growers* and each category experiences various negative and positive factors that influence the decision to become a student. Some of the interviewees could be classified according to these categories but the researcher would suggest that the categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, Mary could be described as both a *late starter* and *single parent* as she experienced, on the negative side, financial concerns and lack of confidence as a *late starter* but also had to contend with childcare problems and juggling family, work and study as a *single parent*. On the positive side, again she experienced both, the cathartic experience associated with the *late starter* and the opportunity to be a role model for her family associated with the *single parent*. Similarly, David would fit into both the *careerist* and the *personal growers’* category as his subject area is directly related to his work but he also displayed an interest in the subject and in lifelong learning itself. It is almost a way of life for him; he is already educated to PhD level but returned to education for a special purpose award at level seven on the national qualification framework, and mentioned his intention to pursue a Master’s degree in the future. Emma believed that she and her classmates would fit the profile of *escapees* who are seeking a way out of their current jobs and Betty fits comfortably into the *late starter* category as she felt the time was right for her and has the self-belief that she could do it.

However, it would appear that the categories outlined by Osborne et al fall short in terms of a category that would be suitable for Darragh, Freddie, Sinead, Sarah, Tina and Gary all of whom were initially motivated to return to education having found themselves facing unemployment or, at the very least, operating in a declining sector. They could possibly be categorised as the *late starter* who is looking for a new start in life but this fails to address the fact that there were extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivating factors affecting their actions. Specifically these students were victims of an economic downturn which was the driving force in their decision to return to education. To classify them as a *late starter* belies the level of choice they had in their decision to engage in education. This is not to suggest that they did not undertake their programme of their own free will but rather to highlight the fact that were it not for the macro environment it is entirely possible, even likely, that they would not have engaged in education at this point in their lives.

This external motivation of losing employment or fearing impending unemployment permeated the interviews with over half of the participants, and this is of particular relevance given that the research was conducted in the IoT sector which has traditionally been associated with vocational education at a time when Ireland was experiencing recession. It highlights the ongoing role of IoTs in providing a space for adult learners to engage in education to improve their employability and to liaise with local industry to try to match graduate skills with current and future vacancies. But if this is the only function of the IoT then it truly has become “an appropriate base for redundant white collar workers” (Finemann cited in Phillips, 1986: 291).

It would be disappointing to think that the only function of education in the IoT sector is to create human capital for the neo-liberalist agenda but it would equally be ill-advised to overlook the reality that many mature learners are returning to these institutes for that purpose. As an educator who believes, like Dewey, that education is should not be purely built around occupations but should be an end in itself, this could be quite a depressing scenario in one sense, but instead it can be viewed as an opportunity. The fact that many mature learners return to education for career or vocational reasons should be embraced, as it allows access to a body of the population who might never engage with education unless the economic environment created the impetus. This is the educator’s opportunity to ignite an interest in education in these adults; to bring out the best things that are latent in the soul as per the teachings of Plato; to encourage the rejection of oppression as advocated by Freire; to develop their capacity for intellectual work as promoted by Gramsci; to facilitate their transformation as described by Mezirow; to teach them to think critically as Dewey suggests. “The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning” (Dewey, 1938:48), fundamentally, it is an opportunity to instil in them a love of learning while providing the vocational education that they also desire.

**5.6 Conclusion**

Evidence of transformation in the learner narratives were used to test Mezirow’s theory and it appears that higher education does result in transformative learning. At times the learners themselves were unaware of their transformations but as an objective outsider I was able to trace the transformation through their words. Mature learners not only learn more about their chosen subject area, but their meaning schemes are altered and the way in which they see themselves and the world around them changes. The degree to which transformative learning was identified in the narratives of the learners varied and based on the evidence from this sample it would appear that the first engagement with higher education tends to be the most transformational, with subsequent interactions being less influential. Students who were engaged in higher education for the first time reported increased confidence and having discovered new talents, or rediscovering old ones; factors which are indicative of transformative learning. All of the ten phases of transformative learning advanced by Mezirow were applicable only one of the narratives and therefore a less rigid understanding of transformative learning as advanced by authors such as Boyd & Meyers, Cranton and Dirkx would appear to be more reflective of how transformative learning occurred for these participants. The intangible nature of the phenomenon means that it does not lend itself well to being classified and measured by a rigid list of phases.

The role of a mature learner can be fraught with many concerns but there were many positive experiences also reported. This is truly reflective of the concept that learning is a process of suffering and doing. The outcomes of education are transformative but at times the process is painful and is set in an environment of financial stress, time pressure and guilt associated with lost time with family and friends. Some mature learners reported feeling less skilled than younger students particularly in relation to information communications technology. In addition many reported difficulty in participating in group work for a number of reasons including the lack of motivation exhibited by other learners and their tendency to fall into the role of supervisor within the group. Discontent was expressed with non-practical subjects such as personal development where the value of such modules was not immediately evident to the mature learners who felt frustrated at having to participate in something they did not perceive as being worthwhile. There appeared to be some confusion around the type and number of mature leaner support services that were available at the various IoTs that participated in this study.

It appears that students must endure and overcome external barriers in order to be rewarded with the intrinsic learning and growth that adult education can offer.

Another addition to existing knowledge relates to the effect of full and part time modes of delivery on the mature learner experience. It appears that the mode of delivery of programmes to mature learners is fairly insignificant and that the experience is broadly similar, albeit with a few notable differences. Financial pressure is greater on full time students and time pressure is greater on part time students. In addition it would appear that negative experiences are more likely for mature learners who are studying in full time programmes that are integrated with traditional learners than part time counterparts. This finding is of relevance to policy makers who wish to improve the learning experience of mature learners.

Mature learners who were studying exclusively with other mature learners did not report feels of isolation within their class, but some did report feeling isolated from the student body more generally. This was particularly the case for part time courses that were delivered outside of the normal academic year. Given the national and European efforts to increase levels of lifelong learning, policy makers should be aware of the impact that making students feel excluded could have. It is important to ensure that all students have access to a learning environment that is inclusive and encourages the cross fertilisation of ideas between students and learners at different levels and in different subject areas to improve educational outcomes. Feelings of isolation within the class group were reported by full time mature learners who were integrated with traditional learners which would indicate that practitioners need to be aware of this potential to feel isolated and try to ensure that mature learners are integrated as much as possible with the rest of the student body.

Existing literature related to the classification of mature learners could be enhanced by including a category that captures students who return to education for purely vocational reasons, often as the result of recession. This category was particularly relevant for this research which, it should be noted, was undertaken during the most difficult economic circumstances for thirty years. While some learners will only engage in education with a view to reskilling and improving their employability, there are some who will initially attend higher education for that purpose but undertake further study. “The goal of education is to enable individuals to continue their education” (Dewey, 2004: 69), and this research identified mature learners who fit this profile, further evidence of the transformation that has occurred. Acknowledging vocational education as a primary motivating factor for many mature learners in this sector does not mean that the purpose of education as an end in itself is not relevant. Rather it presents an opportunity to create a learning environment whereby vocational learning can occur in tandem with a more holistic development of the individual. The vocational education process need not be distinct from a transformational learning environment; rather it can provide the setting in which students transform themselves and how they view themselves in the world.

**6.0 Conclusion and recommendations**

**6.1 Introduction**

This chapter seeks to outline the main conclusions that can be drawn based on evidence from this research. In addition, recommendations that are intended to improve the experience of mature learners at Irish institutes of technology are presented, and suggestions as to how they could be implemented with minimal budgetary demands are advanced. Some of the actions are specifically targeting mature learners and some address the learning environment more broadly, but all are based on the reported experiences of the mature learners who participated in either the online survey or the semi-structured interviews for this research. These recommendations and implementation strategies seek to combine the existing literature, the evidence from this research and my professional experiences.

As outlined at the introduction to this research, its aim was to add to the existing literature related to mature learners in the IoT sector, to inform my own teaching practice and to influence policy at a national level in relation to mature learners in this sector. The conclusions and recommendations below are intended to provide the platform from which the latter two in particular can be realised. This section is designed to combine the existing body of knowledge and the evidence gathered during this research to provide practical ways in which mature learner experiences in Irish IoTs can be enhanced and the potential for transformative and lifelong learning can be maximised. The applied nature of this section reflects the philosophy of the IoT sector which is very focused on providing practical solutions to existing problems.

**6.2 Transformative learning**

Transformative learning is evident from the reported experiences of some of the participants of this research, but it would appear that the transformative effect is most significant during the individual’s first encounter with higher education. Therefore lecturing staff and providers of mature learner supports need to be particularly cognisant of mature learners who are coming to higher education for the first time. A positive learning experience is likely to transform the way in which they think which is of even greater importance than changing their level of knowledge about a particular subject; “the value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking” (Dewey, 2004: 146). Evidence from this research (section 5.2.1) demonstrates how education can change an individual’s outlook on life and even their demeanour. This transformative process makes learners more empathetic and less argumentative which has positive ramifications for society more widely.

**6.2.1 Recommendation**

Educators should be aware of, and where possible facilitate, the transformative aspect of adult education.

**6.2.2 Implementation**

Mezirow suggests that reflective practice is required to allow transformative learning to occur. Including a reflective learning report for projects that are undertaken either individually or in groups will provide learners with the impetus to reflect. It need not be titled ‘reflective learning’ but could ask the student to consider simple questions such as:

What did I enjoy most about completing this assignment?

What would I do differently if I were to repeat this assignment?

What skills did I have that contributed to this assignment?

What skills were deficient and how can I address that before the next assignment?

Building self-confidence and competence is another integral phase in the transformative process (section 2.5.4). Unfortunately there are students who will fail to demonstrate having met learning outcomes and while educators must maintain academic integrity it is important that if a student is failing assessments they are provided with timely and comprehensive feedback which will give them an understanding of why they have been unsuccessful. Feedback is a fundamental part of the learning process and is a good opportunity for the student to ask questions that they may not want to ask in a group setting. Furthermore it is an opportunity for the lecturer to provide some feedback which can improve self-confidence. For example, if a student has failed to analyse a topic sufficiently, perhaps the lecturer could provide that feedback but also mention how well the work was presented, or how comprehensive the bibliography was. Positive reinforcement is fundamental in building confidence and encouraging students who doubt their ability to persist.

Part of the process of transformation requires students to try out new roles and as such, curricula should be developed to include practical aspects such as tutorials, lab work or work experience where possible, which will afford mature learners the ability to apply their knowledge and try out new roles.

**6.3 Improving computer skills**

Many of the participants in this research reported concerns about their level of computer literacy and suggested that a focus on practical skills such as touch typing would be of great benefit, particularly to the older mature learners. One of the institutes involved in the research had a resource available for mature learners to assist with computer applications and proof reading. While this is ideal it is unlikely that such a resource could be funded in the other institutes.

**6.3.1 Recommendation**

Mature learners should be afforded the opportunity to learn basic computer skills, if required.

**6.3.2 Implementation**

Support needs to be provided for mature learners to ensure they are capable of using information communications technology in an effective manner. While some courses will offer modules in computer applications or similar subjects, the opportunity to acquire these skills needs to be available to all mature learners. One day courses or online tutorials are likely to be less effective than the opportunity to engage with somebody on a one to one basis who can be of assistance with computing queries. This is particularly relevant when learning practical skills and also given the fact that many of the learners reported a preference for a “monkey see, monkey do” approach to learning (section 4.4.3).

If costs or timetabling issues will not permit the use of institutional staff to provide these tutorials, there may be an opportunity for final year students who are studying business administration or similar courses to act as tutors. This could lead to credits towards their own qualification. If the IoT does not have a suitable body of students, partnerships with further education colleges who provide training in the areas of computer literacy and typing could be established and again credits could be awarded for this activity. A competency test would need to be administered and interviews would be required to ensure that suitable students were selected as tutors. Not only would the students teaching gain credits for their award, but they would also be engaged in socially responsible behaviour and are likely to receive intrinsic rewards such as feelings of self-worth. Thus using education for “social action as well as individual accreditation” (Bowl, 2014:4) and potentially generating an environment in which intergenerational learning can occur.

Induction days should be used as an opportunity to identify students who have had little or no exposure to information communications technology previously, who can then be offered additional support as soon as possible.

**6.4 Inclusiveness**

Part time mature learners were less likely to have issues around social integration with classmates or negative interactions with lecturing staff than their full time counterparts, but a number of part time learners did report feeling isolated from the rest of the student body (section 4.3.1). This was particularly relevant for students who were undertaking courses, with a strong vocational focus, that did not run concurrently with the normal academic year. Furthermore part time learners, who are more often than not mature learners, are not represented by the Union of Students in Ireland in the way that their full time colleagues are. This means that they have less ability to elicit support from other students either on a formal or informal basis if any issues arise. Freire advocates the oppressed taking action to free themselves, but it is much easier to free yourself if you can be united in that pursuit. It is important the mature learners, particularly those who are studying part time are not isolated and are able to access support from their peers should the need arise. This idea is reflective of the work of Siedle (2011) who suggests that mature learners should have a role in running the class.

The findings from this research demonstrate that even though full time mature learners are represented they felt that the student’s union was not relevant to them and did little to serve their interests (section 4.4.4).

**6.4.1 Recommendation**

Mature learners should be represented by the Union of Students in Ireland and should be consulted within their institute.

**6.4.2 Implementation**

Structures should be implemented to ensure that all students, regardless of the mode of course delivery, should be afforded representation by the Union of Students in Ireland. If membership of the union cannot be centrally funded for part time students as it is for full time students, they should be given the opportunity to join at a fee. Ideally a mature student officer post should be established in all IoTs, to represent the interests of this cohort, whom the literature and this research clearly demonstrate have different needs to their school leaver counterparts.

While mature learners cannot and should not be forced to take up a position as class representative, their voices need to be heard. Often the election of a class representative, in my experience, is tantamount to a popularity contest which leaves the mature learners, especially those on full time courses, at a distinct disadvantage. In this instance positive discrimination which makes the election of at least one mature learner mandatory may be useful, but as it is a voluntary role, would be subject to the co-operation of willing mature learners. Policy makers should ensure that when consultation with the student body is taking place for any reason e.g. curriculum development, programme board meetings, departmental planning, facilities development there should be a concerted effort to ensure that a mature learner representation proportionate to the number of mature learners in the institute are included.

**6.5 Improving the experience of group work**

While some of the participants reported positive experiences of group work, there were significant issues that were raised particularly around the difficulty of having people who were less diligent in the working group (section 4.3.1.1). While it is neither realistic nor desirable to expect the lecturer to resolve internal group conflicts, it is integral that the lecturer provides students with the tools that will make group work a more positive experience for learners.

**6.5.1 Recommendation**

Mature learners should be taught skills that will help avoid or deal with group conflicts.

**6.5.2 Implementation:**

If all students are aware that their contribution will be visible to both their other group members and their lecturer they are more likely to engage in group work in a meaningful way. A group progress sheet (Figure 3) is a useful way in which the attendance at group meetings, the tasks assigned and the actions completed can be recorded. Having used this method in practice, I have found that the number of complaints about working in groups reduced significantly. In addition, when an issue does occur it is much easier to act if you have a record of non-attendance or non-completion of tasks that can be discussed with the underperforming student, rather than trying to rely on hearsay and accusations.

**Figure 3: Group progress sheet**

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|  | Group Progress Sheet | | | | | | | | | | |  |
|  |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Date: | |  |  |  |  | Secretary: |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Attendees: | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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|  |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Apologies: | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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|  |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Group Member | | Tasks Allocated | | | Tasks Completed | | | | | |  |
|  |  | |  | | |  | | | | | |  |
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Lecturers should encourage peer review of presentations or assessments to allow students the opportunity to critically assess and provide feedback to their peers which serves as a useful method of learning and also a source of empowerment for the learner. In addition this tends to encourage meaningful engagement from group members as they know that they will be assessed on their level of contribution as well as the final piece of work. This type of peer feedback can be important for mature learners who sometimes admit that they tend to take on the managerial or parenting role in group settings (section 4.3.1.1). At times they may be unaware of how their own personal ambitions may be impacting on the experience of other learners either in a positive or negative way. This again can help to encourage the empathetic aspect of learning that Dewey advocates.

**6.6 Fostering lifelong learning and improving quality of education provision**

Mature learners who reported a positive learning experience often also expressed an interest in undertaking further study and a number of the learners who were interviewed have already committed to taking that step. This indicates the importance of educators and institutions trying to create a positive experience for their learners in order to encourage lifelong learning, thus helping to eliminate the threat of a devaluation of humanities and the characterisation of higher education as profit-making (Rowland, 2012). Ideally even programmes developed for vocational purposes should try to increase skills, knowledge and competence in the broadest sense, given the power of education to create a more peaceful, fair and inclusive world (UNESCO). This type of cross fertilisation of ideas is integral to fostering a love of learning in the student. According to Toynton, “restricting [mature] learners to a monodisciplinary framework may result in the non-recognition of prior knowledge, loss of confidence and of any perception of relevance” (Toynton, 2005: 109). For the neoliberalists who might believe that this is a waste of resources it should be recognised that by instilling in the student a love of learning you are also instilling in the future employee a drive for continuous professional development. Providing a more holistic approach to even the most practical subjects can increase the likelihood that the learner will engage in lifelong learning.

**6.6.1 Recommendation**

Lifelong learning should be fostered and future learning opportunities should be discussed.

**6.6.2 Implementation**

Mature learners should be informed about the educational opportunities that exist outside of their current course of study. Currently at some educational institutes, students are required to undertake one module of study totally unrelated to their discipline. For example, social studies students take modules in the business or engineering schools. This is a practical way in which the students can be exposed to learning outside of their vocational modules thus allowing the opportunity to explore learning more fully. This is of particular relevance for the mature learner who has returned to education due to external factors such as redundancy, as it is the opportunity to instil in them an intrinsic desire for knowledge and learning.

Lecturing staff need to be given the opportunity, if not be required, to undertake training in relation to the role of an educator and educational theory as part of their professional development. In the IoT sector, academic staff are often recruited from positions in industry which relate to the subject area they will lecture, but may not have any formal training about how to teach others. The practice of recruiting staff from a relevant career is integral to ensuring that the latest knowledge is available for curriculum and student development, but this must be married with an understanding of education more broadly. Furthermore by encouraging lecturers to engage in lifelong learning themselves the benefits of it will become apparent and they will be more likely to promote it for their students.

Specific training or dissemination of information for academic staff would be desirable in relation to how mature learners differ from traditional school leaver students in order to give them an appreciation of the difficulties that this cohort faces. Mature learners are sometimes perceived as being “high maintenance” as they tend to ask more questions and engage more with the lecturer both inside and outside of the lecture hall. By understanding why mature learners are so concerned with success and being appreciative of the sacrifices that they have to make, lecturing staff are likely to be more considerate and as a result provide a better educational experience for mature learners. It should be noted however, that the students in this study were largely very satisfied with their interaction with lecturing staff but some suggested that there were staff who were failing to meet their expectations (section 4.3.2) and need to be more cognisant of the type of learner they are dealing with.

**6.7 Targeting potential learners**

There were a significant number of references to midlife made by respondents to both the survey and interviews, which would indicate that the return to education by mature learners may be prompted by a broader reassessment of the self that is undertaken during the liminal phase between the adult and true self. Only 0.2% of the population in Ireland aged over forty are engaged in education, compared with 1.5% OECD average (OECD, 2011). While the European Commission is committed to promoting high quality adult learning in Europe there appears to be difficultly in actually making this happen, with numbers currently stagnating.

**6.7.1 Recommendation**

Marketing activity should be undertaken to target adults of middle age.

**6.7.2 Implementation**

Institutes who wish to increase the number of mature learners engaging with lifelong learning should consider ways in which to specifically target adults who are middle aged (approximately 40 for men and slightly younger for women) as this would appear to be a time in their lives where they are more likely to undertake education or at least consider paths they have not previously pursued (Jung, 1933).

It is beyond my expertise to determine exactly how this cohort can be targeted but I would suggest that the marketing and promotion of courses should ensure that they are appealing to this segment of society who are ideally positioned to consider education as part of the process of establishing their true-selves. Images and testimonials of mature learners who fit this profile should be incorporated into marketing materials and should be represented at open days, in promotional videos and on websites and social media platforms.

**6.8 Relevant and engaging curriculum development**

Personal development modules were identified by a number of participants as being a source of frustration and in some instances even patronisation (section 4.3.7). While educational theory would suggest that reflective practice is a critical part of education (Mezirow, 2009), an assertion that is entirely accepted by the researcher, it is essential that such modules are delivered in a way that allows the mature learners to clearly identify what the benefits will be for them personally, academically and professionally. Reflective practice will not be effective if it is simply undertaken with a view to gain credits towards an academic award. Personal development modules that are being delivered to individuals with considerable life and work experiences should be designed accordingly.

**6.8.1 Recommendation**

Mature learner feedback should be sought, and where relevant, incorporated into curriculum development and assessment strategies.

**6.8.2 Implementation**

Mature learner representatives should be included in any consultation in relation to new programme or curriculum development as outlined previously (section 6.4.2). Educators should consider whether or not a one size fits all personal development module can really be applied to both school leaver and mature learners. Ideally such modules should be designed to allow mature learners to incorporate their life and work experiences with a view to developing a personal practice of critical reflection in all aspects of their academic and working lives. The purpose and expected benefits of such modules should be clearly communicated to participants e.g. improved communication skills, ability to undertake critical analysis, increased confidence.

Where possible, learners should be encouraged to be part of problem generation as well as problem solving. This addresses Lindeman’s fourth assumption that adults have a deep need to be self-directing (section 2.4). This can be accomplished by giving students a broad remit but requiring them to determine the actual project that will be undertaken, which, following approval from the lecturer can be executed.

For example, the lecturer of a marketing course might set the following broad objective:

*You are required to improve the business performance of a local enterprise.*

The learners would then determine what that assignment might actually entail, for example:

*What enterprise will be examined? (E.g. where they work part time, a service they use)*

*What activity will be undertaken? (E.g. social media campaign might be executed and its impact measured or students might conduct marketing research to determine the level of interest in a potential new product)*

*What reporting structure will be used to present findings? (E.g. presentation, report, video)*

Allowing student ownership of the assignment will help to alleviate some of the issues that mature learners reported in relation to feeling patronised (sections 4.3.7 and 4.4.3). This type of approach requires flexibility on the part of the facilitator but is integral in helping to encourage thinking as well as knowledge acquisition (Dewey, 2004). Provided learning outcomes are being met, there is no reason why learners cannot contribute to the assessment method. Giving mature students the opportunity to generate the problem is a great way of incorporating their life experience in the academic arena and reinforcing the extent to which that life experience is valuable and can contribute not only to their own knowledge, but also to improve the learning outcomes of their peers. This is likely to contribute to increased levels of engagement and confidence for the learner.

**6.9 Addressing external barriers**

It is beyond the scope of any institute to become involved in the external barriers that their mature learners face, however, having an awareness of them may create a more understanding and supportive environment. Student funding decisions are determined outside of the individual institutes but there needs to be advice and support available in each institute for students who are having difficulty in securing or maintaining their financial support. Administrative staff working in the areas of admission, grants and fees, need to be provided with the information they require to effectively direct students to the relevant body, dependant on their difficulty. The stress of financial worries or time pressure will only be exacerbated if students have to spend time trying to chase down individuals who can assist them efficiently with their queries.

The other most significant external barrier for the mature learner is time, and while this barrier cannot be eliminated, students can be taught skills that will allow them to maximise their time, through its effective use.

**6.9.1 Recommendation**

Staff should be aware of the significant external barriers that mature learners face and strive to deal with the students in an understanding and helpful manner.

**6.9.2 Implementation**

Requests for fee payments ideally should be sent to students at the time of, or just after grant payments are made, rather than increasing their financial stress at a time when institutes know grants have not been received. Payment plans should be agreed with students who are incapable of paying fees in one or two large payments, ideally monthly or weekly payment should be collected. While this does present an administrative difficulty it would also represent a significant reduction in financial pressure and may provide the opportunity for education to students who otherwise would be excluded due to their financial circumstances.

The online application system, Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), was welcomed as a means to provide a more effective and efficient service for students or potential students who were making grant applications for education. The difficulty is that some mature learners, particularly the older mature learners may not be sufficiently technically proficient to access and engage with the online process. In addition, some potential learners may not have access to a computer, or particularly in rural parts of Ireland, may not have internet access. Thus there should be administrative support available at IoTs for mature learners to assist them with this process if they do not have the ability or facilities to do so themselves.

**6.10 Creating awareness of mature learner supports**

The findings of this research clearly demonstrated that there was little knowledge of mature learner supports, either in terms of what exactly they were, or how and where they could be accessed. Some introductions to mature learner support services were outlined at induction days, but there seemed to be a lack of additional communication. It is important to acknowledge that induction tends to be a time of information overload and uncertainty for the learner, particularly those who have not engaged with education for a long time. Therefore it is important that additional communications are sent to learners particularly at times that they are likely to need them most.

**6.10.1 Recommendation**

Mature learners supports should be widely and regularly advertised.

**6.10.2 Implementation**

Supports should be presented and discussed at induction days, but should also be re-advertised during the semester. An online platform such as moodle™ or blackboard™ would be an ideal location on which a number of supports can be described and the relevant contact details stored centrally. Providers of supports should work with administrative and academic staff to ensure that reminders are sent to mature learners at the relevant time e.g. academic writing workshops should be advertised around the time that reports are being compiled for continuous assessment and stress relief programmes should be advertised before the exam period.

Perhaps the best type of support that could be offered to mature learners is the assurance of other mature learners who have experienced the difficulties that they are enduring. A mentoring programme whereby second or subsequent year mature learners would volunteer to meet with the new mature learners and provide ongoing support either in person, via e-mail or by phone would be of great benefit. The mature learners who volunteer could perhaps be awarded credits towards their programme of study, where appropriate, or could be given some award of social engagement by their institute. A mentor of this nature is likely to be more accessible than lecturing or administrative staff and the new mature learner may be more willing to ask what they perceive as irrelevant or silly questions, which are in fact pertinent to their success. Mentorship would offer benefits to the mentors beyond just recognition; it would also be likely to lead to positive intrinsic rewards such as feelings of empowerment and confidence. In addition it would make the mentor and the student in receipt of mentorship more aware of apprenticeship type relationships, which are often one of the most important ways of learning in a new workplace. This direct form of support may be more effective than mature learner support groups that offer the opportunity for mature learners to meet, mainly because such groups are less likely to be frequented by experienced mature leaners who have found their feet.

**6.11 Future work**

This research has generated a greater understanding of the mature learner experience at Irish institutes of technology but there are many areas of further exploration that could be undertaken to deepen that understanding. Primarily it would be interesting to see if the transformative learning process could be examined in a longitudinal study, to try to verify the claim this research makes in relation to the first interaction with higher education being of most significance. Furthermore, a study across the entire IoT sector or a comparative analysis with the university sector could reveal further knowledge about the transformative learning process and how it is experienced by mature learners in Ireland.

Situational differences of mature learners were of interest in this study and it can now be concluded that the mode of delivery of the course, full or part time is of some significance. Full time learners experience greater financial pressure and part time learners experience greater time pressure which was to be expected, but interestingly this research also discovered that full time learners are seven times more likely to report having had a negative experience than their part time counterparts. Other aspects of education such as interactions with lecturers, administrative staff, support services and their experience of assessments and examinations showed little variation, so it would appear that mode of delivery is of little significance for those variables.

The participants who demonstrated the greatest transformations in this research were in full time education, but it was also more likely to have been their first higher education experience so correlation but not causation can be noted.

The context in which this research was undertaken was one of extreme economic difficulty and fiscal constraint. Employment and employability were often quoted as being motivating factors in the mature learners’ decision to return to education. This heavy vocational emphasis is most likely linked to the fact that the IoT sector has historically provided large numbers of part time and flexible programmes and maintained a high proportion of mature learners as a result. Many of the students were government funded and it was heartening to see that for some it was a very positive experience that they may not have been able to undertake without that state support.

European and national policy demonstrate a commitment to increasing the participation rates for mature learners but in recent years the Irish and European targets are not being met. Improving human capital is one of the main reasons why governments invest in education but this improved employability brings with it additional intrinsic rewards such as increased confidence, better health and a more positive outlook. From this study, it was demonstrated that a number of the participants who engaged in education for employability reasons are now intending to undertake additional study which hopefully is the first step to their engagement with lifelong learning.

Education has the ability to change lives and in doing so change societies. The power of education should not be underestimated and the opportunity should be open to all.

**6.12 Final conclusions**

This research was intended to address three main objectives; to improve the understanding of full and part time mature learner experiences in Irish IoTs; to inform my practice as a lecturer in the sector; and to help influence policy related to supporting mature learners in Irish IoTs. The main contribution to knowledge that this research makes is an improved understanding of mature learner experiences in Irish IoTs and the extent to which the mode of delivery, full or part time, affects that experience. The gap in the literature that existed on the experience of mature learners in the IoT sector specifically has been addressed. The research indicates that the mode of delivery is of some significance given that full time mature learners are more likely to experience isolation and financial pressure, whereas part time learners are more likely to experience time pressures. Overall the experience of both cohorts was reported as being a positive one and a number of the participants expressed an intention to continue their education beyond the level that they are currently engaged in, which may indicate the potential for meaningful lifelong learning.

This research was undertaken in a sector that has been regarded as integral to providing vocational higher education in Ireland since its foundation, and the evidence has shown that many of the participants of this research had engaged with education for that purpose. Adult learners in this research who were returning to education for vocational reasons were more likely to undertake a full time course, while those who were learning for empowerment or self-fulfilment were more likely to participate in a part time course. This finding is important when trying to develop policy and provide services for individuals who are seeking a vocational education. In addition to having achieved vocational educational aims, there was also evidence of transformative learning occurring. The meaning schema of some of the participants had changed and increased confidence levels were reported. This demonstrates the important role that education has in helping individuals to realise their full potential, academically and personally. Having improved my awareness of this potential, I will endeavour in my future practice to create a learning environment which couples vocational education with transformative education.

At the time of concluding this research, the Irish higher education landscape remains in a state of transition and the structure of the IoT sector will potentially be reformed. The human capital approach to education is particularly closely aligned to the IoT sector which has historically been closely affiliated with regional economic development. I am hopeful that this research has highlighted the extent to which vocational education and the development of the person in a more holistic way need not be mutually exclusive. Rather vocational education should be viewed as an opportunity through which learners who attend higher education for vocational reasons can discover the additional benefits that education offers. Dewey (1938) asserted that in order to accomplish its end for the individual learner and society, education must be based on the “actual life-experience of some individual”. Accordingly, this research has presented and interpreted the life-experience of mature learners in Irish IoTs and based on this evidence has offered recommendations which have the potential to help mature learners, and society more widely, to maximise the potential of education provision at Irish institutes of technology.

*“Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.”*

Mahatma Gandhi

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