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Re-engaging with Education as an Older Mature Student: Their Challenges, Their Achievements, Their Stories.

Helen Graham
Technological University Dublin

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Re-engaging with education as an older mature student: Their challenges, their achievements, their stories.

Helen Graham

This dissertation is submitted to the Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology, in partial fulfilment of the requirements leading to the award of Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies

Supervisor: Matt Bowden

Department of Social Sciences,
Dublin Institute of Technology

September, 2015

Declaration of Ownership

I declare that the attached work is entirely my own and that all sources have been acknowledged.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Word count: 14,994

Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere.

~ Chinese Proverb

Abstract

The decision to re-engage with education at any age can be a significant step for anyone to take. The number of mature learners engaging in further education in Ireland is increasing yearly and public policy continues to encourage lifelong learning. There is a responsibility on institutions providing further education to engage with their students in a meaningful and constructive way. This study addressed an important but neglected area in Irish education research. The study is intended to improve understanding of the mature students' experience and therefore gives a voice to their stories, their achievements and their struggles. It highlights the needs of this particular cohort of learners who represent a minority within a majority demographic population. Also highlighted is the importance of supporting and assisting mature students to participate fully in education and to achieve their goals within the context of lifelong learning. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of a group of mature people who had re-engaged with education after several years and were pursuing a further education course. The study was phenomenological in nature and the voice of the participants was central. A mixed method approach was utilised whereby a questionnaire and individual interviews were carried out with the identified research group. The findings of the study indicated significant personal growth and challenges within this cohort of learners. Challenges included: Finances, lack of IT skills, level of academic requirement and time management. Also highlighted in the findings were the different needs of the mature students compared to the more traditional younger student, the importance of awareness among tutors of their needs plus the importance of support services. Recommendations made in this study include: That prospective students be made aware of the level of academic requirement and the level of IT knowledge required for a course pre-enrolment; that policies and practices be put in place in order to support the older cohort of students; that students be made aware of available supports; promotion of awareness among tutors of the unique needs of the older cohort of learners.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people who assisted in the completion of this study.

To those who participated in this study, for taking the time to share their experiences with me and for telling their stories in such an open and honest way. Without their input this research would not have been possible. It was a pleasure and an honour to have met them and I wish them well on their education journey.

To Olivia who helped me to get this far, I could not have done it without your help.

To my special friend, Nuala, a solid sounding board and constant encouragement to me on this journey.

To my friends who read and re-read numerous drafts, corrected spelling and grammar and provided much needed constructive criticism.

Thank you to my supervisor Matt Bowden for his help and feedback.

A special thanks to my most beloved children, Aoife, Eoghan and Brian, who stood by me and supported me in every way.

Finally, a dedication to my most beloved and sorely missed father, Kevin, R.I.P. You would have been so proud Dad. You are in my thoughts always.

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Acronyms

AE	Adult Education
AEGI	Adult Education Guidance Initiative
AONTAS	Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach (National Adult Learning Organisation)
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CPD	Continued Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DES	Department of Education and Skills (formerly Department of Education and Science)
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
ETB	Education and Training Boards
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HE	Higher Education
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IT	Information Technology
MA	Master of Arts
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NDP	National Development Plan
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
PPF	Programme for Prosperity and Fairness
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (The Continuing Education and Skills Service)

TC	Teaching Council
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
VEA	Vocational Education Act
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation sets out to explore the experiences of a group of mature people who have re-engaged with education after several years and are on a further education (FE) course in a College of FE. The participants' voices are central to the study. This study could be helpful to educational institutions in understanding the particular needs and issues facing such students. This in turn will ensure that they are appropriately supported and catered for in order to make their experience a successful one.

Chapter one begins with the context of the research followed by the rationale. It then outlines the aim and objectives of the research plus methodology used. It provides a definition of key terms and concludes with an outline of the study.

1.2 Context of the study

FE originates from Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses in the 1980s, and Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) have been the main providers of FE in Ireland. Colleges supporting these students began calling themselves Colleges of Further Education. The first formal recognition of FE was in the Department of Education and Science (DES) publication, *Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education* (1995). The FE sector embodies the policy objectives in the 1995 White Paper.

The FE sector has grown over the years and provides education opportunities to over 300,000 students, the majority of whom are mature students (McGuinness, Bergin, Kelly, McCoy, Smyth, Whelan & Banks, 2014). This means that FE is a major provider of adult education (AE). A definition of AE offered for the purposes of the Murphy Report (1973, p. 1) states that AE is: "The provision and utilisation of facilities whereby those who are no longer participants in the full-time school system may learn whatever they need to learn at any period of their lives". Creating opportunities for adult learners to continue their learning journey improves their quality of life and contributes to the well-being of society.

1.3 Rationale

To connect experience with this study, the author returned to education after an absence of 29 years since doing Leaving Certificate, for a variety of reasons including previous negative experience of education and employment. The author began to wonder if and to what extent her story was reflective of the experiences of mature people returning to education in general. A review of the literature also revealed that these issues require further exploration.

There have been few studies done reflecting the voice of mature students in FE. Therefore this study will add to the small but growing body of knowledge in this field. It will enhance understanding of what it is like to be a mature student, often in classes of much younger students, from their unique standpoint and contribute to improving the service. It has the potential to encourage more mature students to take the often frightening step of returning to education by encapsulating the actual lived experiences of those who have done so.

1.4 Aim and objectives of the study

The overall aim of this study is to explore the experiences of mature people who have re-engaged with education. The objectives are:

To explore the participants' experience of formal school, their level of attainment and if these influenced the decision to re-engage with education.

To discover why they decided to re-engage with education at this time and the positive and challenging aspects.

To investigate if the needs of mature students differ from those of the younger student cohort.

To explore the area of supports for mature students.

1.5 Methodology

This research is a small-scale, in-depth study. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is used. Quantitative methodologies can be useful for providing an overview of the context and, used in conjunction with a qualitative approach, can contribute to a more complete understanding of the individual experience. Data is

gathered from a questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews with mature students on a FE course.

1.6 Definition of key terms

FE refers to education and training after second level schooling but is not part of third level education. The term mature student is often used to differentiate students older than the traditional 18 year old students who have just finished secondary school. FE colleges attract anyone over the age of 16 years and the term mature student in the context of FE are those who are 21 years of age or older. This study concentrates on the experience of students who re-engaged with education in the FE sector after an absence of several years. The participants range in age from 28 to 62 years old.

1.7 Outline of the study

Chapter One introduces the dissertation and provides an overview of the research including context and rationale. This is followed by the aim and objectives, the adopted methodology, a definition of key terms and an outline of the study.

Chapter Two is a review of the literature pertaining to AE. It provides a brief description of FE followed by a history of FE in Ireland. This is followed by reasons why adults return to education and the challenges they face. How adults learn, teaching style and the accreditation system, policy and legislation are also identified and discussed.

Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodological approach taken by the researcher which were deemed suitable for the aim and objectives of this research. The sampling procedure, sample, data collection methods, justification and data analysis procedure are described. Finally, ethical considerations and limitations of the study are presented.

Chapter Four presents the research findings which are set out under three main themes that emerged from the data collected. These themes are further categorised into sub-themes. Direct quotes from the participants are used to support the findings.

Chapter Five is a discussion of the research findings in relation to the literature review and aim of the study.

Chapter Six contains the researcher's conclusions from the study and makes recommendations based on the research findings and discussion.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is a review of selected literature pertaining to the area of AE and mature adults re-engaging with education. It will explain what FE is, provide a historical flavour of FE in Ireland, and outline key topics that arose. It will show that there is a keen interest in the adult population to return to education. It will highlight some of the many reasons adults choose to do so and the challenges they face. It will also show the importance of hearing directly from those adults as to their experiences.

2.2 What is FE?

The FE sector grew largely out of the PLC programme which has been in existence since 1985. The PLC programme developed as a route into FE for students with Leaving Certificate, and for mature entrants who do not have their Leaving Certificate but possessed experience relevant to the course. Administration, management and staffing are those of a second level school. Colleges providing these courses began to call themselves Colleges of Further Education reflecting the changing profile of the students and indicating the role of the PLC sector in providing second chance education and lifelong learning. FE covers education and training which occurs after second level schooling but is not part of the third level system (DES, 2000). As it falls between two levels it therefore has a less well defined identity than other sectors of education. The profile of FE students varies in terms of age, previous educational experience, gender, ethnicity and life experience (O'Reilly, 2012). It encompasses a spectrum of motivation from economic necessity to leisurely pursuits. The provision of FE includes vocational courses, university access courses, second chance education, community education, adult literacy, programmes for the Travelling community and self-funded adult education. The global economic downturn of the late 2000s coupled with European Union (EU) policy on lifelong learning has seen huge numbers of non-traditional/adult students returning to education.

2.3 Historical background to AE/FE in Ireland

The terms AE, FE, mature/adult students/learners are terms used interchangeably in the literature which perhaps reflects the unstructured system of education provision for those who left the formal education system. Geaney (1998) states that FE in Ireland did not emerge in a planned and ordered way. Present day AE services began with the 1930 Vocational Education Act (VEA) when 33 VECs were established nationally providing full-time continuation and technical education. By 1959 there were over 86,000 adults attending courses (Coolahan, 1981). The VEA allowed for the provision of any course for which there was sufficient demand. This opened the door to further/continuing education.

From 1930 to the 1960s VEC services expanded significantly and in 1969 AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, was founded. In the same year the government set up an advisory committee on AE which submitted a report, *Adult Education in Ireland* (Murphy, 1973), to the Minister for Education. A primary concern was with education relating to those who had left full-time education. Two recommendations from this report were implemented: In 1979 50 AE organisers were appointed to develop AE services at local level; and in 1980 The Adult Education Section was established in the Department of Education. The Kenny Report followed in 1984 and as a result VECs established AE Boards. These developments helped to broaden the scope of VECs considerably.

By the 1990s a variety of groups were providing AE programmes. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) International Adult Literacy Survey in 1995 showed that almost 25% of the Irish population aged between 16 and 64 scored the lowest level of literacy (OECD, 1997). This triggered a government commitment to developing AE policy. The DES produced a *Green Paper: Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (1998) which set out key areas for improvement within the sector. These included the professional status of teachers and guidance and support for participants. Building on the Green Paper and driven by the EU agenda on lifelong learning, the Government produced the *White Paper* (2000). This marked the State's adoption of lifelong learning as the "governing principle of educational policy" (DES, 2000, p. 12). The context of lifelong learning in the EU and in Ireland differs slightly. The Irish focus tends to be on AE whereas the EU encompasses all learning from cradle to grave.

As education and training is now the centre of the modern economy and the world continues to move from an industrialised to a 'knowledge economy' (Giddens & Sutton, 2013), education and training policies are becoming increasingly important. FE provision in Ireland is underpinned by the European and national policy context for AE which in turn is aligned to employment and lifelong learning discourse. The literature shows that two discourses are operating in FE. One is the neoliberal discourse where focus is on the needs of the economy and the second focuses on the supportive learning environment which has typified the sector historically.

The White Paper (2000) and the Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning (DETE & DES, 2002) are key pieces of literature in the development of FE and AE provision as they set out the national policy framework for AE. Several more pieces of legislation have been enacted which are relevant to FE services in Ireland (Appendix A).

2.4 Why adults return to education

Returning to education can increase employment prospects, provide educational opportunities missed in the past, facilitate new friendships, and develop new interests. One common outcome is significant personal development and growth (Mercer, 2007; Rogers, 1983). FE can often mark a new start for people taking on the challenge of AE and lifelong learning (Walters, 2000). The vision of the Strategic Framework for FE (Scottish Office, 1999) places emphasis on the FE sector enabling people from every part of the community to pursue lifelong learning for both vocational and personal development. Illeris (2003, p. 13) argues that people are compelled to get involved in education for economic reasons rather than an "inner drive or interest". Although large numbers of people probably return to education to improve their employment prospects, for others it can be a life changing event resulting in personal growth, intellectual development, and an increase in self-esteem and confidence.

According to AONTAS there are approximately 300,000 adults involved in FE programmes each year (AONTAS website). The figure is difficult to quantify due to the range of initiatives available and because no comprehensive national database of statistics for participation in AE is available. A breakdown of the most up-to-date figure can be seen in Appendix B. A study by Watson, McCoy and Gorby (2006)

found that considerable numbers of ‘older’ people were taking PLC courses. It also found that the growth in numbers in the PLC sector could be attributed solely to the increase in mature students accessing the sector. They point out that the PLC sector was bringing people back into the educational system. In the case of mature students there was an overwhelming number of females to males taking part across all age categories. The fact that over half of the students participating in PLC courses were over the age of 21 proves the value of these courses in bringing people back to education.

There has been much research into the motivation of adults to return to education but as Rockhill (as cited in Scanlon, 2008) argues studies have concerned themselves more with precision to the expense of the reality as experienced by the people involved. Adults return to education for a variety of reasons including second chance (Coolahan, 1981; Fenge, 2011; Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002; McFadden, 1995), up-skilling, employment, promotion, previous experience of education (Salisbury & Jephcote, 2008; Shafi & Rose, 2014), fulfilling a lifelong goal, personal growth, self-actualisation (Waller, 2006), passing the time, learning a new skill, improving on an old skill, significant life event (Bridges, 2004; Sugarman, 2001; Walters, 2000), changing demographics (UNESCO, 2014). A report on adult learning and education (DES, 2008) states that the philosophy of AE/FE in Ireland is to provide a range of education programmes for young people and adults who have left school early or who need further education and training (FET) to enhance their employment prospects. The main objectives of the further and adult education programmes funded by the DES are to meet the needs of young early school-leavers; to provide second chance education for people who did not complete upper secondary education; to provide vocational preparation and training for labour market entrants and re-entrants (DES, 2008).

Waller (2006) argues that when and why adults return to education is highly individualised. A study by Aslanian and Brickell (as cited in Walters, 2000) in the United States (US) in 1980 found that 83% of learners 25 years and older surveyed were engaged in learning due to life events. A study of older adults’ motivation for engagement with FE and higher education (HE) in Scotland by Findsen and McCullough (2006) demonstrated that the majority of participants undertook learning for more than one reason. The main motivators highlighted in this study were

personal growth, subject interest, life transitions, work/career change and the desire to learn something new. Work-related considerations were the most significant motivating factor. A study by Gallacher, Crossan, Leahy, Merrill and Field (2000) found a complex interaction of a number of factors as to when and why adults engage with education. Some key motivating factors found were self-development, employment, involvement in community and voluntary organisations, overcoming health and related problems. A longitudinal study by Orth, Trzesniewski and Robins (2010) found that engagement with education had a significant positive impact on self-esteem.

Gallacher et al. (2002) in their discussion on adult returners to FE make the point that by the 1970s the FE sector in the United Kingdom (UK) was an important avenue back to education for those who wanted a second chance at gaining qualifications. Fenge (2011) undertook a study into the experiences of mature students on a foundation degree course in a college of FE in the UK. She found that participants had difficult early educational experiences and unrealised potential (Britton & Baxter, 1999) and their choice of further study was a way of getting a second chance.

A study by Walters (2000) looked at the experiences of mature students in HE regarding motivations, expectations and outcomes, where the main emphasis of the research was on the students' own perceptions. This study found that education can be a great agent of change in people's lives. Although this was a study in the HE sector the issues raised are similar to those in FE despite a significant difference in student profile.

Gould (1978) in speaking about growth as the obligation and opportunity of adulthood, states that rather than being a 'plateau', adulthood is a time of change. Furthermore, key events in our lives can make us see ourselves as creators of our lives rather than living what we think is our destiny (Gould, 1978). This fits with Mezirow's transformative learning process, which he describes as emancipatory (Mezirow, 1981), whereby adults recognise their culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and take steps to change it.

Malcolm Knowles, an influential figure in AE who developed the theory of andragogy (the education of adults), refers to three ultimate needs and goals of human fulfilment (Knowles, 1980). Prevention of obsolescence is one. This arises from the fact that traditionally education was considered the preserve of youth whereby

everything one needed to know was learned at that stage. In this rapidly changing society and era of lifelong learning this is no longer valid. The second need referred to by Knowles is the need for individuals to achieve self-identity through development of their full potential. From a psychological point of view the literature will tell us that we all possess a need for complete self-development (Knowles, 1980). Maslow (1968) in his desire to understand human motivation arranged human needs in a hierarchical order. As each need is met one may reach the highest level called self-actualisation. Maslow believed that everyone is capable and desires to move towards self-actualisation but that progress can be interrupted by unmet needs at the lower level. Life events such as losing a job, death of a family member can cause such interruptions. Bridges (2004) and Sugarman (2001) maintain that these kinds of significant life events prompt some to take stock of their lives and take up new interests, including education. Knowles (1980) writes that people whose basic needs have been met are motivated to actualise their full potential. In this regard it is then the role of the educator to assist the learner to “whatever level they are struggling” (Knowles 1980, p. 29). The third need according to Knowles is for the individual to mature; moving from dependent (child) to self-directed (adult) being. If one goal of the adult educator is to assist individuals to continue a maturing process throughout life, this then “provides useful guidelines for the development of a sequential, continuous and integrated programme of lifelong learning” (Knowles, 1980, p. 32).

2.5 Challenges

Most adults benefit from returning to education (Dawson, 2003), however adults face considerable challenges when taking that step. Some of the biggest challenges include lack of time, finances, confidence issues, lack of support systems, accessibility to college campus and classes, feelings of being too old to learn and social anxieties (Dawson, 2003). Murphy and Fleming (2000) in their research into mature students in HE found a number of challenges facing the students. The most significant were financial, relationships with partners, other external commitments, the academic components of essay writing and exams. These issues are similar to those facing students in FE and can cause considerable anxiety for students which can negatively impact on their education. Online courses can help those who do not have the time to attend a college and also those who may feel intimidated by being in a

class of much younger students. Colleges around the world are now offering courses outside of the typical term time to facilitate a diverse student population who have jobs and families.

Although numbers are growing yearly in Ireland and worldwide the mature student cohort is likely to be in the minority in the FE classroom. Watson et al. (2006) found that over half of the students participating in PLC courses in Ireland were over the age of 21. This growth in older learner numbers along with online options is helping to remove some obstacles for the older student which may prevent their returning to education. One initiative resulting from the DES White Paper (2000), called the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), provides flexible options such as part-time, modular or flexible learning options.

Mature students re-engaging with education after a considerable length of time since formal school can be at a disadvantage compared to the younger students who recently sat their Leaving Certificate exam. Specifically the challenges of essay writing, study skills and lack of exam practice can present significant challenges for mature students, particularly if they have not written an essay or sat an exam since school (Murphy & Fleming, 2000).

Education systems all over the world are changing rapidly, partly due to developments in information technology (IT) (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Lack of IT skills is a typical problem among older learners. Studies done in the UK, Australia, by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland and by the European Commission (EC) showed that large numbers of older learners had little or no IT skills (EC, 2013; NALA, 2009; Taylor & Rose, 2005), and that IT skills are a powerful tool to raise the levels of literacy and numeracy among adult learners (Kambouri, Mellar & Logan, 2006; NALA, 2009). NALA (2009), The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 (DES & SOLAS, 2014) and Kambouri et al. (2006) suggest embedding IT skills within the adult literacy programme. Taylor and Rose (2005) stress that low IT skills are a barrier to learning but also have an impact on the successful engagement and retention of older learners.

2.6 How adults learn

Illeris (2003) speaks about the rapid increase in AE programmes due to the fact that lifelong learning has become more integrated into employment policy rather than an issue of emancipation. He further states that adults are less inclined to learn something they do not perceive as meaningful to them. Whereas Malcolm Knowles maintains that andragogy is a specific theoretical and practical approach based on a humanistic conception of self-directed and autonomous learners and teachers as facilitators of learning (Knowles, 1980). Knowles in describing the characteristics of the adult learner states that as we develop towards adulthood:

- the need for self-direction increases;
- adults need to know why they need to learn something before commencing their learning;
- adults have a psychological need to be treated by others as capable of self-direction;
- adults have accumulated experiences which can be a rich resource for learning;
- adults have a problem-centred orientation to learning;
- readiness to learn becomes orientated towards the adult's need to perform social roles;
- adults apply new learning immediately;
- the more potent motivators for adults are internal. (Knowles, 1980)

Some adults may return to education because life circumstances, experiences, or life stage has caused them to think that perhaps their view of the world has been limited and they want to expand their thinking. Jack Mezirow believed that as we mature and gain more experience our perspectives can be challenged as they cease to fit in with our actual experience of the world (Mezirow, 1981). Whereas in childhood learning is formative (derived from formal sources of authority and socialisation), in adulthood it is transformative as adults are more capable of seeing distortions in their own beliefs, feelings and attitudes. Mezirow (1981), as a result of his study into women participating in college re-entry programmes, developed the term 'perspective transformation'.

In order to continue towards independence we need to develop perspectives that are more inclusive and integrative of our experiences. This transformative learning process can transform our mindsets, or frames of reference, to be more inclusive and open to change based on the ability to question or critically reflect on ourselves and on society. This in turn will lead to empowerment and change in the learner.

Paulo Freire (1970) argued that educative processes are never neutral; they will be either liberating or domesticating for the learner. Freire (1970) refers to the 'banking' concept of education. By this Freire was comparing students to empty accounts to be filled by a teacher, making the students into receiving objects who adjust to the world and thereby inhibiting creativity. The problem with this is that there is a danger the students may become dependent on the teacher for knowledge and do not learn to think for themselves. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2014) states that a paradigm shift is required in order to move from knowledge-conveying instruction towards learning for personal development and the release of creative potential. Dewey (1938) rejected the notion of the educator taking on the role of 'dictator' and advocated for students being provided with opportunities to think for themselves and be allowed to articulate those thoughts in a more co-operative educational community. This approach is ultimately more suited to adult learners whereby they bring a wealth of experience and knowledge into the classroom, which they got by living (Murphy & Fleming, 2000). The diverse range of academic ability coupled with external commitments many mature students have has implications for teaching and learning in FE.

2.7 Teaching Style

Teachers are the key facilitators of learning and appropriate learning approaches are especially important where there have been negative experiences of prior learning (Scanlon, 2008). The banking model referred to above has no place in the realm of adult learning. The constructivist approach, whereby the learner is actively involved in their own learning building on previous knowledge and experience, is more suited to adults returning to education. Following on from Knowles' characteristics of the adult learner it follows that adults need to be involved in every aspect of their learning. Therefore educators of adults need to think about their teaching as a

collaborative and creative process where learning can be agreed upon mutually, where the learner is in control, and where the educator's role is to be a facilitator and guide.

In a study by Mooney (2011) it was found that participants were surprised to be so involved in their learning as there was an expectation that college would be like school. The more adult learners are involved in their learning the more their confidence and self-esteem will be impacted and the more likely they are to continue in their education.

Adults come to courses with a variety of experiences and varied educational backgrounds but teachers in FET are more likely to be qualified to teach second level. In the area of AE there has existed a presumption that primary and secondary school trained teachers can apply their expertise to the teaching of adults (Bassett, Brady, Fleming & Inglis, 1989). Yeaxlee, who promoted the student-centred approach to learning, states that adults are a heterogeneous learning group and therefore their needs cannot be met by formal classroom teaching methods (Yeaxlee, 1929, as cited in Jordan, Carlile & Stack, 2008). The McIver Report (2003) found that many students felt the teaching style was more appropriate to adolescents than adults. One of the recommendations of the McIver Report was that the duty of care to FE students should be modified in line with maturity and adult status. Its vision was to provide a sector which recognised real adult learning needs and where staff training would respond to adult learners positively and imaginatively. It called for funding to be invested in the FET sector for resources required by FET providers. These recommendations remain largely unimplemented due to prohibitive costs (ETBI, 2014). However, there are now ten courses for teachers within the FET sector which are accredited by The Teaching Council (TC) (TC, 2011). The Education for Employment Project (2007) makes the point that educators need to be able to adjust not only to diversity of learning styles but also to diversity of age. The DES White Paper (2000) refers to appropriate teaching strategies for adults as a key element of the framework of lifelong learning. McDonnell (2002) states that adult learning issues should be an integral part of teacher training. According to the TC (2011) in order for a FE teacher education programme to achieve accreditation from the TC, qualification at post-primary/level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), (NQAI, 2003) is required. The University of Washington produced a toolkit for teaching adults based on Knowles' theory of andragogy. It acknowledges the

differences in teaching adults and stresses the importance of having a knowledge of how adults learn (University of Washington, 2012). Teachers in FE colleges need to have the skills and knowledge of adult learning in order to create meaningful and relevant social contexts in which learning can take place and to adopt adult-appropriate curricula, programmes and teaching methods (Coleman, 2001). This presents a significant challenge for educators as most FE classrooms can have students of 16 years and up.

2.8 Accreditation

The Irish NFQ was established in 2003 and is the framework through which all learning achievements is measured in a coherent way. The NFQ puts the learner at the centre of the education and training system in Ireland. It includes awards made for all types of learning from initial learning up to Doctorate no matter where the learning is gained.

2.9 Recent developments

In 2013 SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) was established under the FET Act 2013. SOLAS' remit under the DES is to oversee planning, co-ordination and funding of training and FE programmes. In 2013 the VECs were dissolved and 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were established under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013. ETBs manage and operate second level schools, FE colleges and a range of adult and FE centres delivering education and training programmes. The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI), informed by the DES White Paper (2000), is aimed at helping individuals make informed education, career and life choices and is available from the ETBs. It provides ongoing guidance which supports the student's motivation to continue with a programme, especially in cases of previous negative educational experience.

The FET Strategy aims to direct and guide transformation of the FET sector over five years. It aims to provide an integrated FET system and improve the standing of FET in Ireland, among other things. The Strategy puts employability and the economy firmly at the forefront of FE while still acknowledging the value it will play in social inclusion. Education is being presented by the Irish Government and the EU as key to

meeting the challenges facing the global economy, however a predominant focus on employment could risk exclusion of those not connected with the labour market. The success of the FET strategy remains to be seen.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has examined literature pertaining to the area of AE and mature adults re-engaging with education. It has looked at historical developments in the area of FE and at policy and legislation which has shaped it. The many and varied reasons why adults return to education have been explored and how adults learn has been described. The challenges faced by older people returning to education as well as the positive elements have been discussed. The challenges for educators to cater for this student cohort have also been highlighted.

A review of existing literature has shed light on the following issues that warrant further exploration:

- Is prior experience (positive or negative) of formal school and/or the length of time away from education a factor in deciding to re-engage with education?
- Mature students returning to FE is a relatively under-researched area compared to the HE sector. Some issues facing mature students are similar in both sectors. However, it is not appropriate to extrapolate findings from studies in the HE sector and compare them to the FE sector because the two sectors attract completely different groups of mature students with regards to background, qualifications, and knowledge of techniques and strategies required for exams and essays.
- The needs of mature students differ considerably from the younger cohort with regards to supports, prior experience of education and length of time away from education, as well as varying abilities according to age, for example memorizing for exams.

In order to gain further insight into the reality of re-engaging with education as an older person this study will now investigate the experiences and perspectives of mature students who have done so.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The main aim of this study is to explore the experiences of a group of mature students who re-engaged with education. A review of existing literature has shown that large numbers of adults are returning to education for a variety of reasons. This research involved participation of 23 mature students currently attending a College of FE. Some participants finished formal schooling and some did not but in each case there was a gap of between 10 and 46 years before re-engaging with education.

This chapter describes the chosen research design and methodological approach taken. The decision to use a questionnaire and interviews is explained. Details of the sampling procedure are outlined as are data collection and data analysis techniques used. Ethical considerations and limitations are discussed.

3.2 Research design

According to Bryman (2012) a research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data. As this enquiry involves investigating the experiences of mature students it is open-ended and exploratory in nature. The main purpose of qualitative research is to understand the experiences from the participants' perspectives. Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 2) state that qualitative research is "pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people". By using a qualitative research method there is an opportunity to engage at a deeper level with the experiences of the mature students, whereas quantitative methodologies are more constrained in what they contribute to understanding lived experience. However, quantitative methodologies can be useful for providing an overview of the context and, used in conjunction with a qualitative approach, can contribute to a more complete understanding of the individual experience.

This study adopted a phenomenological approach, which is a design of enquiry where the researcher accesses, analyses and reports on the lived experience of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants (Creswell, 2014; O'Leary, 2010). Phenomenological research captures the meaning of the experience for

individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014), such as the meaning of returning to a setting which they had left many years before, and therefore supports the aim of this research.

While the topic under investigation relates to human experience, which lends itself naturally to qualitative methods, a quantitative method is also used to provide an overview of the participants. As lived experience is best measured through words as opposed to numbers the bulk of the research focussed on the qualitative method of interviews. A questionnaire (n=23) was administered in order to gather quantitative data followed by interviews (n=7) to gather qualitative data. The questionnaire provided participant demographics and brief information on education history and choices. The interviews explored the participants' lived experience of returning to education in greater depth.

3.3 Sampling procedure

The validity and reliability of a study depends on good sampling decisions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Denscombe (2007) states that the researcher needs to ask the question "given what I already know about the research topic, who or what is likely to provide the best information?" With this in mind, a purposive sampling technique was employed. Participants relevant to the study (Sarantakos, 2013) were chosen by targeting mature students in a college of FE who had re-engaged with education.

When attempting to access a research sample researchers are obliged to acquire permission from 'gatekeepers', that is, those who control access to the information which the researcher seeks (May, 2011). Contact was made by written letter to the principals of five colleges of FE seeking a meeting to discuss access to mature students for the purposes of doing a research project (Appendix C). An information sheet was also enclosed which outlined the purpose of the study and what participation would involve (Appendix D). These letters were followed up by telephone calls and emails. The principal of one college agreed to meet and discuss the project. Having met the principal and answered any questions the researcher was given permission to access three classes in the college where there were students that fulfilled the criteria outlined above. The principal, on the researcher's behalf, sought

and was granted permission from the teachers of these three classes to gain access to the mature students during class time. A date and time was agreed for this to take place. As end of term exams were imminent the researcher had a window of one week to speak to the classes and find volunteers.

3.4 The sample

The researcher was given access to a Return to Education class, a Social Care class and a Performance class. Visiting each of the classes in turn the researcher introduced herself and explained the purpose of the visit. The term mature student can cause confusion as it is used interchangeably with adult learner and anyone 18 years old and over is an adult. Clarification was required in order to capture the mature students who had re-engaged with education. The researcher then distributed a short anonymous questionnaire (Appendix E) to students willing to fill one out. The questionnaire facilitated accessing participants who would be willing to take part in an interview by including a question to this effect. Only those willing to be interviewed were asked for contact details to be included in the questionnaire.

3.5 Data collection methods

Data were gathered using questionnaires and interviews which were deemed valid for this study. The rationale for selecting these methods is now outlined.

3.5.1 Questionnaire

A short, preliminary questionnaire was chosen to be administered for several reasons. Firstly, the researcher felt that this method would be an efficient way of accessing the mature student population from the general student population in the college. Secondly, the questionnaire would provide an overview of the demographics and characteristics of the mature student population. Thirdly, and most importantly, it allowed the researcher to identify students willing to participate in interviews. Finally, the questionnaire could identify issues to be explored in greater depth in interviews.

The questionnaire was first piloted and adjustments made in order to clarify the questions that caused confusion. The tutors gave time at the beginning of class for the researcher to explain the project and make a request for volunteers. The researcher was on hand for any clarifications needed and this also facilitated efficiency of collection and the highest rate of return.

3.5.2 Interviews

The most common types of interviews used in qualitative research are semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Both are designed for data collection on the basis of the capacity to provide insights into how research participants view the world (Bryman, 2012) and have the common aim of discovery (Denscombe, 2007). Semi-structured interviews allow for specific topics to be covered while still allowing a great deal of leeway for the interviewee in how to reply without sacrificing the focus of the interview (Barbour, 2008). Unstructured interviews resemble a conversation (Bryman, 2012) where the interviewee is allowed to respond freely to perhaps just one question. As there were specific issues that the researcher wanted to explore with all interviewees a semi-structured interview was considered to be most suitable. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in answering while still covering vital issues which allows for comparability when analysing data, and is therefore valid.

The students willing to be interviewed were contacted by email to confirm their willingness to participate, to thank them and to arrange dates and times. The participant information sheet was attached explaining the research project and what participation would entail. A pilot interview was conducted which led to clarification of some questions that caused a misunderstanding on the part of the pilot-interviewee.

Qualitative interviews require a great deal of planning (Mason, 2002) in order to generate relevant data. To ensure a focus on the research objectives an interview schedule was devised (Appendix F). An attempt was made to focus on topics rather than specific questions in order to generate open-ended questions and to allow for flexibility for participants to develop their ideas and allowed the interviewer to pursue opportunities that may arise during the interview. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the course of the interviews varied slightly from one interviewee to the next.

In the interests of putting interviewees at ease and to make the experience as comfortable as possible, each participant was given the option to choose their preferred location and time for interview. The least intrusive recording device was selected by the researcher in the hope that its presence would not put the interviewees off. Before beginning the interview the interviewees were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation and that withdrawal was an option at any stage of the process. Each interviewee was then asked to read the participant information sheet again and sign a Consent Form (Appendix G). Time was given for questions/clarification before beginning the interview to help establish a relationship of trust between interviewer and interviewee. Participants were assured and reminded of the confidentiality of their participation before commencing. The duration of each interview varied between twenty and forty minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed verbatim by the researcher to ensure reliability and accuracy of information (Seidman, 2006). Recording ensures accuracy of data for subsequent analysis and allows the researcher freedom to focus on the interview and to make observational notes without getting distracted by having to concentrate on taking down what was said (Biggam, 2009; Bryman, 2012). A transcription of an interview is included in Appendix H.

3.6 Data analysis

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

3.6.1 Quantitative data

The quantitative data were gathered using a questionnaire which were then analysed to provide an overview of the mature students in this study. A participant profile was built from the data (Appendices I and J) and further data are presented in figures 1-4.

3.6.2 Qualitative data

Data from the transcripts of interviews were collated by the researcher and thematically analysed. The researcher read and re-read the transcripts in order to become familiar with the data and then coded the data by organising excerpts from the

transcripts into categories (Appendix K). The researcher then searched for connecting threads and patterns within the categories from which themes were identified. The data was then grouped into three main themes in accordance with the aim and objectives of the study. The three themes are: Challenges; Personal experiences; Quality of education provision. The findings under each of these themes are presented in chapter four and discussed in chapter five in line with the literature review.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Researchers need to be alert to the ethical implications of any decisions they make (Punch, 2014), therefore careful regard to ethical issues is needed when engaging in social research at every stage of the process. The well-being of the participants is paramount. In the collection and analysing of data and the dissemination of findings it is expected that the rights and dignity of participants are respected, that any harm to participants arising out of their involvement in the research be avoided, and that the researcher operates with honesty and integrity at all times (Denscombe, 2007).

The nature of social research is such that it can include anything from consumer preferences to drug testing. However, the underlying ethical principles remain the same and fall under three categories; protecting the interests of participants, avoiding deception or misrepresentation, informed consent (Denscombe, 2007). The researcher communicated with openness and honesty at all times to participants. An information sheet was disseminated to all participants clearly detailing the purpose of the research, how it would be carried out and what participation would entail. The information also covered issues of anonymity, confidentiality and the voluntary nature of the study. Participants were reminded at each step of the process that withdrawal was an option at any stage. Assurances were given that any data either written or recorded would be stored securely and only accessed by the researcher. It was explained that no names or any form of identification would be used anywhere in the final report. The researcher's contact details were included in the participant information sheet should any participant have any questions. Having discussed the research and clarified any outstanding issues, the participants were then asked to sign a consent form.

This study was approved by the Head of School of Languages, Law and Social Sciences under the research ethical guidelines as set out by the Dublin Institute of Technology.

3.8 Limitations

Due to the small scale sample in this study it cannot be assumed that the findings are representative of the experiences of all mature students who have re-engaged with education. It was not the intention of this researcher to make generalisations but rather to portray the reality of the experiences of a selected group of participants. Despite the small scale sample however, findings do show consistencies that could be further investigated by other researchers.

When using interviewing for data collection there is a danger of developing a close affinity with the interviewees to the extent that it may be difficult to separate the stance of the researcher from those of the interviewees. The researcher is herself a mature student returned to education and therefore aware of possible 'interviewer bias' (Bryman, 2012). Sarantakos (2013) rates interviewer bias in face-to-face surveys as 'high' compared to telephone and mail surveys which rank as moderate and nil respectively. Social research is influenced by a variety of factors, one of which is the impact of values on the research. Values can reflect the personal beliefs and feelings of the researcher (Bryman, 2012). In order to avoid bias and for the research to be valid this can be addressed partly by what Bryman (2012) terms 'reflexivity'. Reflexivity means that researchers "reflect on the implications of their methods, values, biases and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate" (Bryman, 2012, p. 393). Edmondson (2007) maintains that in reflexive social science researchers should declare their biases and expose proclivities influencing outcomes. It would be untruthful for this researcher to state that this research has not been influenced by her own experience. However, as this disclosure neither validates nor invalidates the research outcome (Gergen & Gergen, 2007), this author nevertheless undertakes to ensure that any researcher bias has been minimised by being aware of and acknowledging its presence in this study.

One college responded out of five colleges contacted. The researcher had a window of one week to find a sample before the start of final exams and end of term. The

number of mature students in the college was small and not every student agreed to take part in the study. Therefore the final sample was limited. Out of three classes that the researcher spoke to 23 students agreed to fill out the questionnaire; seven of these agreed to be interviewed. The seven interviewees all came from the same class. This implies that the findings will be somewhat biased rather than a more balanced cross-section of mature students studying different subjects.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has justified the use of a quantitative research method combined with a qualitative method which meets the aim of the research. It describes the selection and sample of participants and explains the choice of data collection methods. Data analysis is described, ethical considerations were established and limitations acknowledged. The next chapter will present the findings from the questionnaires and interviews using direct quotes from the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings from quantitative and qualitative data that were gathered during this research. The data will provide an overall picture of the experience of a small number of mature students who re-engaged with education in a College of FE. In keeping with a phenomenological approach the focus of this chapter is to present the raw data as it was reported. The data are presented under three headings: Challenges; Personal experiences; Quality of education provision. Data from the questionnaires are anonymous therefore participants are identified by a number and pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the interviewees. An overview of participants who took part in the questionnaire and interviews can be seen in Appendices J and K respectively.

The quantitative data in this research were gathered from a questionnaire. Most of the qualitative data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews; however some qualitative data were also gathered from the questionnaire.

4.2 Challenges

There were many challenges reported by this sample group which are included in the following analysis of data.

4.2.1 Academic component

A significant number of participants found the course very demanding. Seventeen survey participants selected course workload as one of the least enjoyable aspects of college (Figure 1).

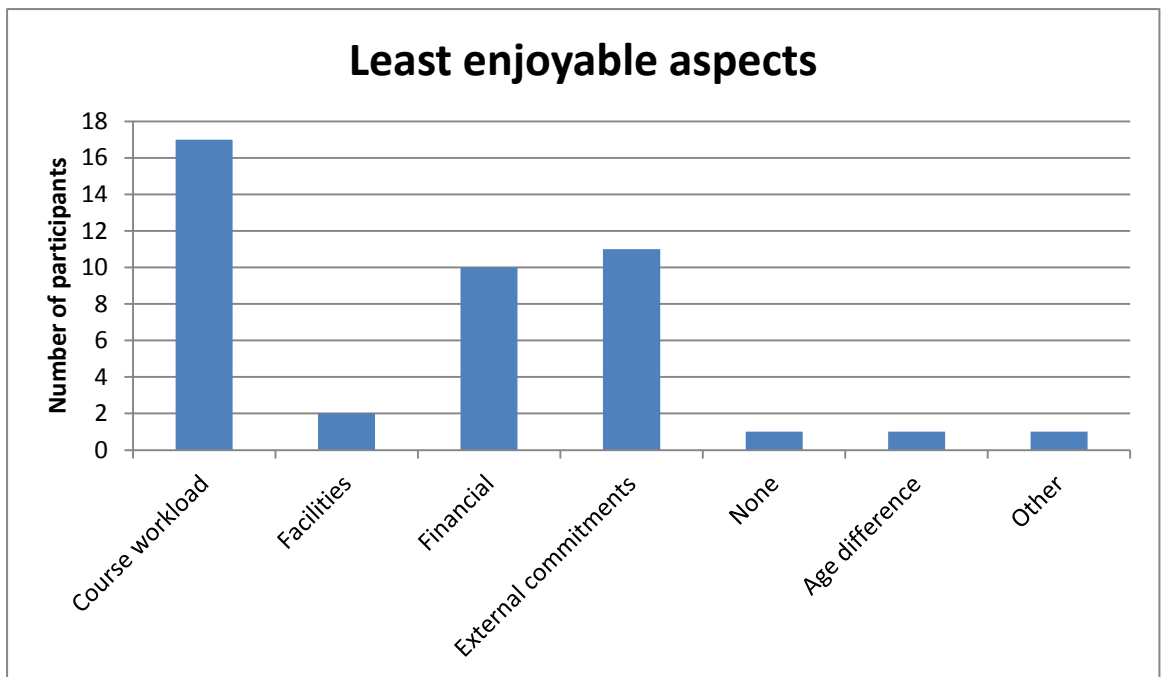


Figure 1: Least enjoyable aspects of being a student

There was no qualitative data gathered on the questionnaire with regards to the academic component of the course, however this issue was explored at interview.

When asked how they managed the demands of studying and assignments there was unanimous opinion among participants that the academic component proved very difficult.

John who had not been in education for 40 years knew that the academic component of the course would be challenging for him.

“I always felt that the academic side might catch up on me. When I started and I got to the class I realised just how far back in the class I was. The challenges in the second year were much tougher than in the first year.”

Kate found it *“a bit of a shock”*, whereas David who was expecting it to be *“a bit of a doddle”* discovered that it was *“intense”*.

Kate and Kevin both left school at 15 and neither of them had written an essay before.

“The whole format of essays because that was probably the biggest thing for me was having to learn how to write an essay.” (Kate)

“I never done an assignment to be honest. I didn’t really understand when I was given the brief, you know, I’d have to go off and ask someone.” (Kevin)

Ben realised when he was given his first assignment that it had been a long time since he had written an essay.

“I got the first essay in first year, I realised it was the first time in 38 years that I had ever written an essay and it was a 2000 word essay. I’m not sure I’ve ever written a 2000 word essay before then.”

Liam struggled with exams and felt his age was a contributing factor.

“Exams were hard I found trying to remember that guy’s name or trying to remember that theory, anything like that is a lot harder when you are over fifty or sixty.”

4.2.1.1 Referencing

Referencing proved to be an issue with some students, one of whom had never heard of it before.

“..... the biggest thing for me was having to learn how to write an essay and how to reference it; I’d never even heard of that before.” (Kate)

4.2.2 Finances

Almost half of the participants surveyed chose finances as one of the least enjoyable aspects of college (Figure 1). Of those that chose finances eight were unemployed while two were employed.

For Kate, a single mother with dependents, finances were of particular concern.

“It was difficult; I didn’t get any grants you know. I was scrimping by really to be honest with you.”

Kevin who had to work and was studying at the same time, making up lost hours at work was essential to his being able to continue his education.

“I’d have to try and stay out later at the weekend to make me money up you know. That’s the only way I could really do it.”

John who left school at fourteen and felt he had “*missed out*” academically was keen to continue to the next level but felt that finances would keep him from proceeding with his education.

“Financially I would have to look at the cost of the course first because em that’s just the way things are. Going on to do the degree course I think you’d be in to the thousands and that’s totally out of the question.”

Liam was on the dole and found the costs associated with returning to education a cause of concern.

“Financially I suppose the financial thing was getting across town and getting in to college.”

4.2.3 Computer competence

Computer competence, or IT, is considered to be an essential requirement for social and economic participation as well as for access to a wide range of services and information in the modern world. For some participants who lacked computer competence acquiring these skills was of significant practical importance. Two participants found the lack of computer knowledge a hindrance to their education and felt that it would be important to take a computer course before entering college in order to be able to keep up. Having to learn computer skills alongside the course was an added burden.

“The whole computer thing was a bit daunting for me. That’s not included in your course and you’d really have to know all that stuff before you come in.”
(Kate)

Ben commented on what he felt was a general misconception about young people and technology.

“I’m quite technologically savvy but a lot of people my age aren’t. Mind you a surprise to me was that some of the young people aren’t either. Everyone says young people are whizzes and in my experience that’s not necessarily the case.”

4.2.4 Time management

Several participants spoke about the challenge of managing their time. Some were juggling family commitments and others jobs while trying to fit in assignments and studying for exams. In some cases managing their time improved as they progressed through the course. Most participants had adult children, but Kate and Ben had children of school-going age. Kate had to work around when her children were at school and found studying in the college was better than studying at home due to the distractions of household chores.

“I was actually going home and thinking ah grand and getting into my normal routine and forgetting about the homework. You get distracted very easily especially when you are a mother.” (Kate)

“Em yes assignments the whole time management thing, I kinda got better at that as I went along.” (Ben)

Mary who has children and was trying to run her own business found managing her time particularly difficult. She eventually had to close the business in order to continue her studies.

“It has been stressful trying to juggle everything. Yeah, time management, with the business, with the kids. When you have kids your time is just not your own.”

Liam felt that the group work was a drain on his time.

“This is where the time management comes in, trying to satisfy somebody who is working who is in doing the same course as me. I felt a lot of my time was wasted.”

Liam also felt that his age affected his ability to study and had to make an extra effort to organise his time.

“By being older I found you know harder to study in the evenings but when I allocated the time and I made space for myself I did better.”

Kevin was juggling his full-time job with his studies while at the same time dealing with health issues. He found it very stressful to fit everything in.

“I was going into college and going home to do my work in me job and going home to do my assignments. I was sitting there all night. I was going to be up all night anyway, so that’s the way I had to be.”

David who had retired and was returning to pursue something he loved was surprised at the intensity of the course. He was not prepared for the amount of time required to get the work done.

“I had this view when I was coming back that oh you know you do about twenty hours in the week in college and sure that’s only a part time job the rest of the time is all your own. I wouldn’t be surprised if I’d been putting fifty or sixty hours a week in the whole thing you know.”

4.3 Personal experience

Despite the challenges mentioned above there was evidence of significant personal growth among participants. In light of their experience participants were asked if they would recommend other mature people to return to education. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to this.

Kate found the social aspect particularly rewarding.

“It’s been a very positive experience for me and it has impacted my life. I have a whole new spectrum of friends.”

Kevin found that it gave him a new lease of life plus a huge sense of achievement and a much needed boost to his confidence.

“This course has given me so much; it’s given me like another language. I didn’t think I’d finish it but I did, so you know, I was chuffed with myself. I didn’t finish school so that was my big thing you know.”

John feels that an unfinished part of his life came together by re-engaging with education after so long.

“It’s been brilliant. Like me, they’ll [other mature people] probably leave a bit better than when you came in. I sort of feel now that a little bit of a jigsaw puzzle that was missing is now in place.”

4.3.1 The needs of mature students compared to younger students

Interviewees were asked if they felt the needs of mature students differed from those of younger students. The general consensus was that needs differed significantly between the two cohorts. As discussed above (section 4.2.3) IT was an issue that

posed considerable difficulty for the older cohort and they were, in the main, of the opinion that IT was not an issue for younger students.

David felt he had certain advantages over the younger students in that he had years of experience working and had gained skills that stood to him.

“Coming from a work environment every day of the week I was doing presentations on one thing or another and putting PowerPoint presentations together. So I mean that aspect of it was easy for me.”

Ben was of the opinion that *“colleges are set up mostly with younger people in mind”* and that things like *“down time stuff”* that the students union were putting on were *“completely irrelevant to me”*.

Having said that, Ben also stated that he

“got on really well with all the younger students in my class or in my year but ended up kinda hanging out with people in or around my own age.”

Kevin felt that the main difference between the two cohorts was the fact that he was working full-time to finance himself and his studies, which he felt was a stress the younger cohort did not have.

“I was coming in and doing my days in college and go straight to work and try and catch back up.”

Liam felt his age and family obligations went against him with regards to energy levels.

“I’m gauging myself against guys in their 20s in class who are able to go to concerts. Getting in early for lectures and things like that I suppose, and having the sheer, I suppose I wouldn’t have the energy.”

However, Liam felt he had *“the old maturity to discipline myself”* and not get caught up in video games and get a good night’s sleep in order to have the energy for the course.

Mary felt the biggest difference between the two cohorts was that she was now studying purely for enjoyment and without the stress of having to find a job at the end of it.

“I’m doing it for enjoyment now and I’m leaving my options open and completely open minded as to what comes out of it.”

Unlike the younger cohort who she feels

“have to get the qualification and they have to get the job after that.”

Kate, while acknowledging that the younger students do work hard, felt that they have more time and don't take studying as seriously as the older students. She felt that assignments and exams were *“a big deal”* for the older students whereas the younger students have skills that the older students do not.

4.3.2 Level of education and experience of formal school

Of those surveyed the average school-leaving age for males was 16.2 years and for females 16.5 years. The average age of participants was males 50 years and females 43.3 years. Just over half of survey respondents did not attain Leaving Certificate standard.

Of those interviewed Liam and Mary reported their formal school experience as positive, while Kate, Kevin and Ben reported it as negative. David reported his experience as both positive and negative, while John reported it neither positive nor negative.

“I just didn't like school; I wasn't happy in school. I was a creative child and of course there wasn't that many creative things going on around me in school so no I didn't and I left.” (Kate)

Kevin left school at fifteen because his mother could not afford the uniform.

“He [the Principal] gave me a load of verbal so I said that's it I'm leaving, so I left.”

Ben reported a good experience of primary school but secondary school was a different matter. He changed school a couple of times but still completed his Leaving Certificate. He considers the possibility that

“We weren't a good fit for each other I suppose; I think that was it.”

4.3.3 Reasons for returning to education

A variety of reasons for returning to education were expressed by those surveyed. Twelve survey participants (or 52%) cited education as their reason for returning to education.

“Needed to up-date my skills and education.” (23)

“To further my education.” (16)

While six survey participants (or 26%) cited employment as their reason.

“I made a conscious decision to change career to increase my employment chances.” (1)

“Wanted a different career path.” (20)

For some participants the possibility of gaining employment in their chosen subject was an unexpected outcome.

“I now intend to pursue a career that I hadn’t seen myself pursuing.” (Ben)

“It’s my life; it’s after putting me in this direction.” (Kevin)

Other reasons for returning were

“To help my children.” (18)

“Cause I was getting nowhere in life.” (15)

“Interest and pleasure.” (8)

Survey participants were also asked why they chose their particular course. A summary is presented in Figure 2.

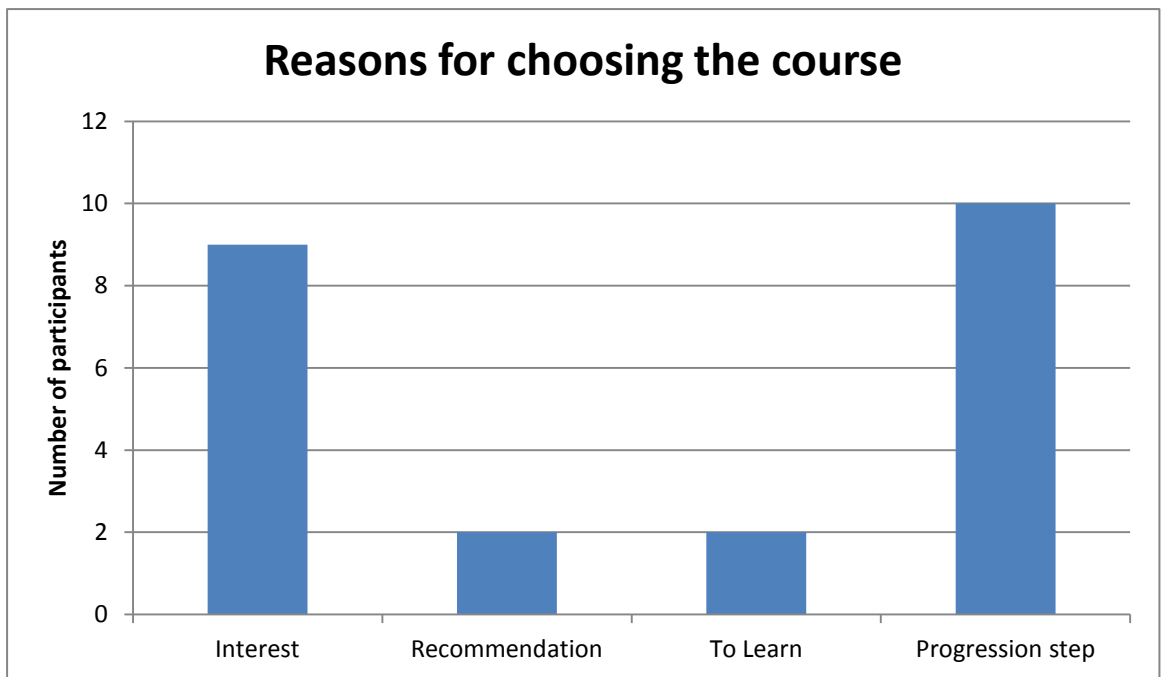


Figure 2: Reasons for choosing the course

The majority of participants were in FE to progress their education, followed closely by interest in the subject chosen. Most participants who cited progression as their reason to return were on a Return to Education course, while most of those citing interest as their reason were on a Performance course.

Kate was keen to re-educate herself while at the same time be a role model to her daughters.

“I think it’s good for me to show them you know to give a good example for them you know let them understand that it’s not just being at home and cooking and cleaning.”

John came back to education after 40 years.

“Coming back to school was something I always wanted to do. I always felt I missed out.”

David stated the importance of continuing education.

“...this is a fantastic opportunity to kind of give me a leg up along the way in terms of learning an awful lot more.... You’ve got to keep re-educating yourself.”

Kevin always wanted to go back to education.

“I never finished school; I was seeing what the college could offer me. I was here to learn.”

While Mary spoke of her disappointment at never having finished a course she started before.

“I’m looking forward to having a qualification.”

Liam was particularly hoping to make a career out of it.

“I’m now looking at jobs. I would hope next year to be applying for jobs.”

4.4 Quality of education provision

4.4.1 Student supports

A key factor in these participants’ experience was the support they received from the college, from tutors and from each other. On their first day students were told about support services available in the college and a booklet was distributed. There was also signage around the college detailing counselling services. One participant was not present on the first day and missed out on this information which proved detrimental to his progress. There was general agreement among most participants that support came mainly from the tutors.

“I think the support comes from the individual tutors in the college. I think it’s been em the level of the support from the individual tutors has been very, very good you know.” (David)

“Supports, yeah, there was some information about supports as well but I know you could always go to the lecturers and they are of course, absolutely always and very approachable.” (Mary)

However, there is considerable evidence from participants that support from their fellow mature students was an important part of their experience.

“One of the guys actually had to show me. I went out to his house and he had to actually show me how to write the assignment out.” (Kevin)

“I was struggling like everybody else but I was constantly on the phone to guys in class and you know we were emailing and stuff.” (John)

Some found group assignments very helpful to their experience.

“It was a challenge and you know I think what stood to a lot of us in the second year was a lot of the assignments were group assignments so it was sort of group participation.” (John)

“I think you are better off being put into a group and that group works together you know, rather than you going off as an individual ” (Kevin)

Whereas Liam, referring to time management, did not.

“There were greater frustrations; mainly working in groups was one. I felt a lot of my time was wasted.”

Liam felt that facilities were “*not as good as they could be*”. He would like to see study rooms available in the college for people “*who have busy home lives*”. He found it difficult to study at home and found the college library noisy. He explained how he pays for one of his children to stay in school after school hours to study and stated

“Something like that in college would be great if there was a room you could go.”

Liam also had particular difficulty with carrying books to and from college.

“So for older people you know, with mature students, would you have better locker facilities so that they could leave all their books in college rather than hauling them in and out on the bus.”

He suggested that mature students could have special allowances made for them due to their age.

“I think maybe colleges could sort of positively discriminate in favour of adult learners as regards study time maybe, rooms, lockers.”

Kevin had health issues which affected his studies. He was unaware of supports as he was not present on the first day when that information was distributed. He walked out of the class one day with the intention of not coming back because he found the stress too much.

“I didn’t know about [name] the first year so em if I’d known about [name] I would have been straight to her.”

Once he became aware, albeit just by chance, of the supports available to him Kevin accessed the college counselling services and was “*in with her for the whole second*

part of the year". He felt he would not have been able to finish the course without support and says "*only for her*" three times during his interview.

Mary was aware of a range of supports in the college.

"In the college itself you know I see signs up around you know for example anxiety if you are worried you know talk to us and all that kind of stuff so there is supports there in various levels you know whether it be for the academic side of it or whether it be for the personal social side as well."

Of particular help to her was the online learning management system used by the college.

"I don't know if you are aware of Moodle, there's a huge amount of information up there."

John was struggling academically and was initially unaware of any supports in the college, "*There was only handouts*". He became aware of a career guidance office but did not use it.

Ben, although aware of the students' union office and its function, felt that this service was more geared toward the younger students.

"I know all the things they run and I know where the students' union office is, I've never set foot in it." (Ben)

4.4.2 Teaching and learning

The majority of respondents reported high levels of satisfaction in relation to quality of teaching, contact with teachers, teaching methods and feedback on assignments. Dissatisfaction levels were low across the board (Figure 3).

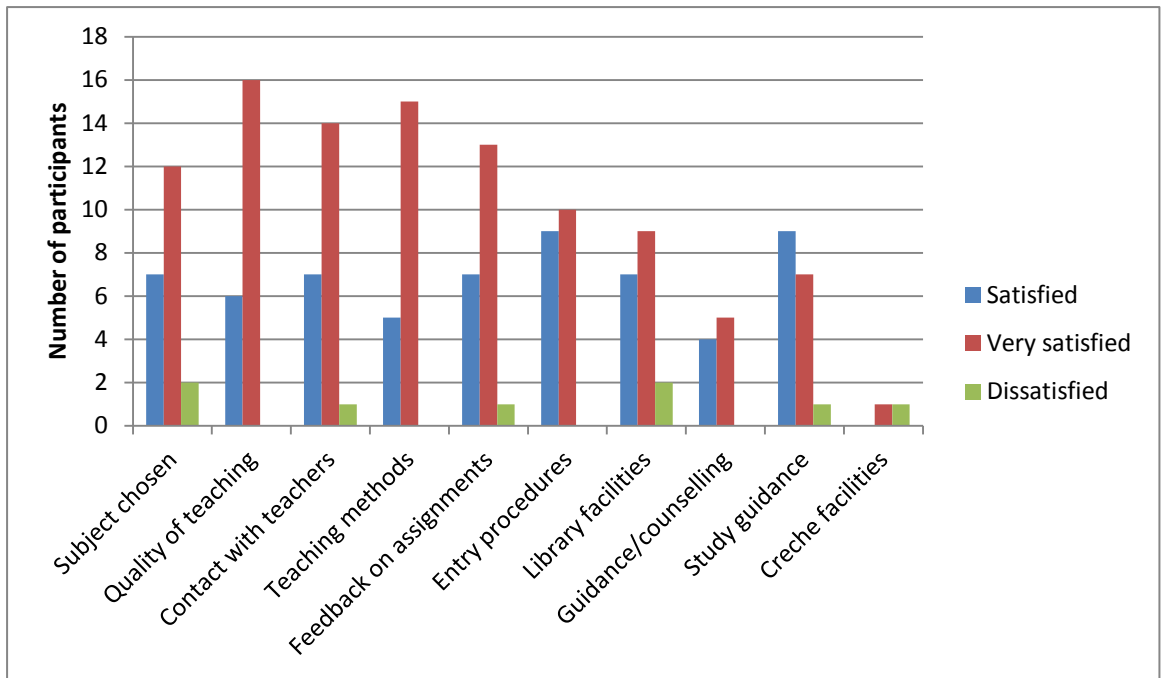


Figure 3: Level of satisfaction with the college

John and Mary were especially happy with the tutors.

“One of the lecturers in particular is just jeez you could ask him anything.”
(Mary)

“They’re interested in the students.” (John)

Mary also pointed out one particular advantage of being a mature student.

“That’s the other thing about being a mature student is that you don’t have any qualms about walking up to somebody and asking You don’t have that barrier between you and the other person because they’re the same age as you probably, sometimes younger.”

John and Kevin stressed the importance of feedback.

“I was getting constant feedback it was encouraging to get that feedback.” (John)

“Make sure you get feedback from your assignments.” (Kevin)

When asked about the most enjoyable aspects of college learning and social contact were on par with each other closely followed by course content (Figure 4).

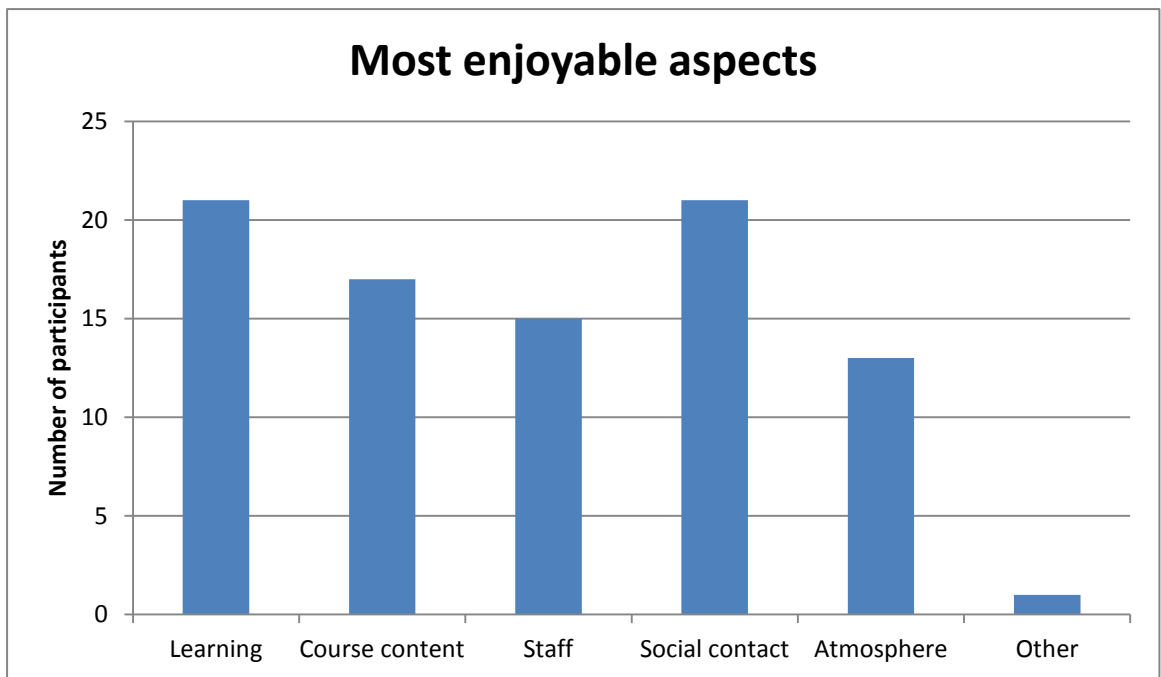


Figure 4: Most enjoyable aspects of being a student

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the main findings that emerged from data analysis of questionnaires and interviews with a group of mature students. The themes that emerged from the findings are discussed in chapter five.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explore the experiences of re-engaging with education from the perspectives of older mature students. The main themes that emerged from the research findings will now be discussed in relation to the literature reviewed in chapter two.

5.2 Challenges

All participants in this study reported a positive experience overall of re-engaging with education. However, it is possible that those who volunteered to take part were coping well with their educational experience. Nevertheless challenges are also evident from the questionnaire and interviews. These students had to come to terms with new routines, coping with assessments, and developing new skills. Some were stepping into college for the first time. Concerns were raised over the level of academic requirement, finances, computer competence, and time management.

Participants were not prepared for the academic component of the course and some were writing an essay for the first time. The oldest interviewee found exams a particular challenge. There is little doubt that memory declines with age (Brickman & Stern, 2009; Small, 2001; Small 2002; TCD, n.d.). This decline in memory coupled with lack of practice at exams (Murphy & Fleming, 2000) can impact on how older people perform at exams and presents a significant disadvantage compared to younger students.

The age profile of the participants bears out the findings of Watson et al. (2006) that considerable numbers of older people were taking PLC courses. The gender balance is at variance with a report by McGuinness et al. (2014) which found that females were consistently higher in numbers in FE than males. Share, Corcoran and Conway (2012) say that women are central to the provision and use of AE. There is no evidence to suggest that the courses involved in this study traditionally attract one gender over the other, but in this study males (n=13) outnumber females (n=10). The data on age leaving school supports the idea that FE is an important provider of

second chance education (Coolahan, 1981; Fenge, 2011) for those who left school early or who lacked qualifications to progress to third level education. The highest level of educational attainment bears out what Watson et al. (2006) found in their report, that older PLC leavers are more likely to have left second level without a qualification.

There is a significant time commitment between attending lectures, preparing assignments, and studying for exams. Many adult learners are working full-time and/or have family obligations. The more external commitments a learner has the less time s/he will have for college work and this can cause stress. Mary speaks about working, caring for her family and studying at the same time and finding it impossible. Several participants reported having to 'juggle' college and work/family commitments. Mary maintained she would not have been able to continue without the support of her husband. Some students reported getting better at time management by the second year.

The cost of education can be high between college fees, books, travel expenses, childcare and stationery. Loss of income could also be a factor as many adults return to education following redundancy. Financing the course and the associated costs were of concern to most. According to the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (CSO, 2013) people living in lone parent households were among those who had the highest consistent poverty rates in 2011. Kate had great difficulty financing her return to education but was determined to re-educate herself and be a good role model to her children. Due to their positive experience on this course some participants now feel encouraged and able to take their education to the next level. For some though financial constraints may prevent this and, as in John's case, may lead to unfulfilled potential (Britton & Baxter, 1999).

Technology has become part of everyday life and knowledge of computer programmes, Internet, social media and email may be required as part of any course. Given their age it was no surprise to find that many of the participants were not up to speed with latest technology. In some cases this proved to be a hindrance to their education. The Performance course used software which was highly specialised. Some participants had a good knowledge of IT whereas others had almost none (EC, 2013; NALA, 2009; Taylor & Rose, 2005). Only one mentioned being asked at interview about his computer competence. Kate and John felt that knowledge of

computers would be needed before starting the course. Kate felt that having to learn computers alongside the course content was an added difficulty for her. Given that there were so many issues with IT it is surprising that none of the participants seemed to be aware of the existence of an IT support department in the college.

5.3 Personal experiences

The reasons mature learners return to education are many and varied and as Waller (2006) demonstrates mature learners are a diverse and heterogeneous group with a complex and individual 'reality of experience'. This was clearly the case with the participants in this study. The majority of participants chose the college for its reputation and because it provided the course they were interested in. Illeris (2003) argues that people are compelled to get involved in education for economic reasons rather than interest. The most reported reasons for returning to education in this study were the need to up-skill, a desire to progress their education and to pursue an interest. This study has shown that a significant number of participants undertook their course of study for the purposes of educating themselves, while just six undertook the course for employment reasons.

Fifty-two per cent of those surveyed did not complete secondary school. When explored further at interview it became clear that education was the main driver of their motivation to re-engage with education, the majority of whom had left school at the age of 14 and 15 years. These students were looking for a second chance at education (Fenge, 2011; McFadden, 1995). A study by Shafi and Rose (2014) concluded that life experiences rather than initial education motivated the participants in their study to re-engage with education. Despite some reports of negative early experience of school, these participants nevertheless wanted a second chance at education and faced the challenges that came with that decision. Provision for second chance education has been made in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 through schemes such as the BTEI as well as funding for the PLC sector (Office for Social Inclusion, 2007).

Mercer (2007) speaks about reclaiming part of the self not developed earlier in the life-span. John fits this description when he remarks that a piece of the jigsaw was now in place for him. An overwhelming 61% of participants said they intend to

continue their education further, 30% said they would not be continuing and 9% said maybe. Evidence from interviews suggests that the positive experience of re-engaging with education was a major factor in their decision to continue their education. Liam stated that he never would have thought of progressing to degree level before he started this course.

Rogers (1983) writes about education being person-centred and a facilitator of personal growth. For some participants the learning experience extended beyond their course content and they learned a lot about themselves. In light of their experience re-engaging with education participants said they would not hesitate to recommend other mature learners to do the same. Some spoke of it having transformed their lives socially and for others it provided a new career path. Mezirow, along with Freire, regarded education as emancipatory and speaks about perspective transformation and how changing the structures of habitual expectation makes a more inclusive and integrating perspective (Mezirow, 1991). John came to the course presuming that he would be way behind everyone else in the class. He thrived on the positive and encouraging feedback he got from his tutors. John's perspective was transformed and as a result he now wants to pursue his education further. However, due to financial constraints he may not be able to do this and therefore may miss out on achieving his academic potential (Britton & Baxter, 1999).

5.4 Quality of education provision

The FE classroom today can consist of students ranging in age from 16 to 60 and beyond and this presents a significant challenge for the educator. Participants indicated their high satisfaction level with the tutors. Jarvis (2010) highlights the importance of practitioners being able to use a wide variety of different teaching approaches in AE. There was a range of educational experience in this sample group and in this regard Knowles' concept of assisting the learner wherever they are struggling comes to mind (Knowles, 1980). Teacher education programmes need to reflect the needs of this group. The TC has acknowledged this and since McIver (2003) there are now ten courses for teachers within the FET sector which are accredited by the TC. The FET sector is fundamentally different to 'school' so the learner-tutor relationship is crucial for success. The literature showed a concern with the way teachers teach adults, however none of the participants reported being treated

like adolescent school-goers (McIver, 2003). What needs to be considered here though is that the interviewees came from a class where there were no younger students present. Therefore it can be presumed that the tutor may have approached the class differently than if there had been a younger cohort also present. With SOLAS in its infancy it remains to be seen how this issue develops and this can be researched in the future as to how SOLAS and the TC can work together to assure suitable teaching and accreditation for this sector for which teachers are still only required to be second level trained.

Findings show that relationships formed between the students were a key factor in many of the students' learning experience (Mooney, 2011). Many of the interviewees spoke of the importance of the support they got from each other, of being part of a team and there was a strong sense of not wanting to leave anyone behind. Others spoke of new friendships made, meeting new people and seeing life from a different angle and sharing skills. It is clear that a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) existed within this group of learners. One participant came close to giving up but for the intervention of a fellow learner. Although this student cohort would not have been used to group work from their formal education, findings show that participants found it very helpful in their struggle to come to terms with the academic component of the course. They indicated that group work not only helped them with the academic learning but also produced positive social outcomes for them.

Most colleges offer support and guidance and this college distributed a booklet on the first day of term detailing various supports available to students. This sample group had differing support needs but some did not access the services for one reason and another. John seemed to think that the supports were there for the younger students. Kevin suffered ill-health which impacted his education but was unaware of supports available in the college and was not present on the day the booklets were distributed. Information on supports was also available online but for those not familiar with IT accessing this would have proved a problem.

The FET Strategy (DES & SOLAS, 2014) incorporates a FET Guidance Service which aims to offer a service to help people make informed educational, career and life choices. This would help people from a variety of educational backgrounds to figure out the course most relevant to them before committing their time and money. As a result of this Strategy Guidance Information Officers are now available in the

ETBs to anyone thinking of returning to education or wishing to continue on their education journey. Participants in this research would have benefitted from this service before committing to the course, if they had known about it, in that they would have been more informed and therefore more prepared for the challenges of returning to education.

Most of the participants felt that the needs of the older student body differed significantly from the younger cohort. There was no report of problems between the two cohorts, however they did not mix. Although there was a feeling that colleges are mainly set up with younger people in mind, the older cohort had no issue with that. Knowledge of IT was an obvious difference between the two cohorts in that it was felt by most participants that the younger students had superior knowledge to the older students. They are the so-called 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) because they have been born into the digital age unlike older learners. Ben, however, was of the opinion that this was not necessarily the case. Liam mentioned several times throughout his interview that he felt his age was a disadvantage in that he had less energy and more external commitments. On the other hand, some participants felt they had significant advantage over the younger students in that they had more life experience and work skills to bring to the course. Some participants remarked that they were now able to do the course for enjoyment rather than having the pressure of getting a qualification for the purpose of employment.

5.5 Conclusion

There is clear evidence of a connection between the findings in this study and the literature reviewed in chapter two. For example, similarities are evident in the myriad of reasons why adults return to education but discrepancies are evident in respect of the supports provided by the college and the needs of the older student cohort. The next chapter will present the conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to present the lived experience of a group of mature students who re-engaged with education. The findings serve to generate a greater understanding of the mature student experience in keeping with the main aim of the research. The challenges plus the positive impacts of returning to education are presented in line with the objectives of the research. Recommendations which could benefit mature learners to maximise their academic potential on their lifelong learning journey are now presented.

6.2 Lifelong learning

UNESCO (2014) strategic objective number one is to develop education systems that foster quality and inclusive lifelong learning for all. Several participants spoke of continuing their education as a direct result of their positive experience of re-engaging. It is incumbent on educators and institutions to create a positive experience for students in order to encourage lifelong learning. Twice the number of participants cited education as their reason for returning compared to those returning for employment/economic reasons. However, it is apparent in the literature that government policy emphasises the economic rather than social benefits of lifelong learning. Based on the findings in this study this emphasis could have implications for those older learners re-engaging with education for reasons other than economic.

6.2.1 Recommendations

- As the AEGI is a relatively new service in the sector mature learners need to be made aware of its existence in order to make informed choices for continuing their education.
- Government policies give equal emphasis to social as well as economic benefits in order to cater for a more diverse population of learners.

6.3 Computer competence

This study has given insight into the issues around IT and the older learner. The knowledge economy has enforced the importance of IT in everyday life and particularly in education. Findings show that lack of IT knowledge significantly impacted these participants and caused stress. There appears to be a general presumption of knowledge of IT but this study has shown this presumption to be inaccurate. A lot of information is available online, about the college, how to reference, supports available and so on. If IT skills are low it is unlikely that students will be able to access this information. The availability of an IT department where help could have been sought was not widely known among this sample group.

6.3.1 Recommendations

- Mature students are made aware of the level of IT knowledge required for a course, pre-enrolment.
- All mature learners be made aware of IT support available on campus.

6.4 Level of academic requirement

Most interviewees referred to their lack of preparedness for the level of academic requirement. Memorizing for exams can be difficult for older students. It was up to the tutors to support the students through the difficulties of how to write an essay and how to reference. This appears to have taken up a considerable amount of class time. Kevin, who struggled academically, is now helping another struggling fellow student. Mature students may be more inclined to approach someone who would better understand their position such as a fellow mature student.

6.4.1 Recommendations

- The college provide essay writing/referencing/exam skills workshops/tutorials outside of the course timetable.
- A skills audit be carried out by the college to identify skills/lack of skills. A skills exchange could be organised and operated by the mature students themselves thus putting no extra workload on the tutors.

- A buddy system operate.

6.5 Time management, finances and external commitments

Many mature students are juggling jobs, families and other commitments. It is beyond the scope of any college to become involved in the external issues that mature learners have to contend with, however an awareness of this by the tutors may help foster an understanding and supportive environment for the learners.

6.5.1 Recommendations

- College staff be made aware of the many external commitments many mature students have.
- Students be taught time management skills.
- A past mature student be invited to open evenings to speak to prospective new mature students. A booklet be produced by outgoing mature students and distributed to incoming students.

6.6 Teaching and learning

Evidence from this study suggests that many lives were transformed through re-engaging with education. FE colleges still provide for both FE and second level education. As long as they are under one roof there remains the danger that FE and second level education will continue to be treated as second level, which is unsuitable for the learners in this study. This study has shown significant differences in the needs of mature learners compared to the younger cohort. Continued professional development (CPD) for educators is vital in order to ensure change, progress and the flexibility required in the FE sector as well as contributing to an attitude of lifelong learning in the college. There was a strong sense of a community of practice operating among the participants and group work was found to be invaluable in helping with assignments. Feedback is fundamental to the learning process and is an important source of encouragement and confidence to all learners but proved invaluable to some participants in this study.

6.6.1 Recommendations

- The institutions be separated as recommended by McIver (2003).
- Tutors to be aware of the transformative aspect of AE and the importance of feedback.
- CPD for all tutors in the sector to ensure teaching and learning methodologies and resources are appropriate for adult learners.
- Tutors to promote a sense of community among mature learners.

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Appendix A

Overview of legislation and policy governing further and adult education in Ireland

Legislation

Act	Implications
The Vocational Education Act 1930	Gave responsibility to VECs for the provision of AE
The Universities Act 1997	Sets out the objectives of Universities, including facilitating lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education.
The Education Act 1998	Promotes equality of access and opportunities for adults who did not avail of education in school.
The National Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999	Provided a legislative footing for the establishment of the NQAI, HETAC and FETAC.
The Education Welfare Act 2000	Set compulsory school attendance age at 6-16 years.
Education (Amendment) Act 2012	Provides for the amendment of the Education Act 1998 and Teaching Council Act 2001.
Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012	Gives providers access to a wider and evolving range of awards and will provide for greater flexibility into the future.
Education and Training Boards Act 2013	Provided for dissolution of VECs and establishment of ETBs.
Further Education and Training Act 2013	Provided for establishment of SOLAS and dissolution of FÁS.

Policy

Title and year of publication	Implications
Learning for life: White Paper on Adult Education 2000	Outlines structure and format of Adult Education and Training in Ireland.
National Development Plan 2000-2006	Set a plan for social, employment and infrastructural investment in the years 2000-2006 in order to promote sustainable national economic and employment growth.
Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF) 2000	The PPF outlines a continuing agreed framework for adult and lifelong learning.
Towards 2016 - Social Partnership Agreement 2006	Social Partnership agreement continuing from PPF. Commitment to adult and continuing education and training.
Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Strategy 2007	Set targets for up-skilling the workforce by 2020, including targets for adult and continuing education and training.
National Development Plan 2007-2013	Continuing from NDP 2000, sets a plan for social, employment and infrastructural investment in the years 2007-2013 in order to promote sustainable national economic and employment growth.
National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016	Sets a programme of targets and interventions for those who are socially excluded.

Appendix B

Breakdown of numbers of adults in education in 2012

180,000 people availing of further education places - including part time and full-time options.

75,000 people registered on FÁS training courses.

5,900 places available on over 200 courses through the Springboard initiative.

AONTAS estimates that up to 30,000 adults also avail of evening courses in private institutions and in the non-formal community sector where participation levels are difficult to quantify.

Source: AONTAS website

Appendix C

Letter to gatekeeper

Principal
College of Further Education

Date:

Dear _____,

I am a student of the Dublin Institute of Technology and as part of my course of study I am carrying out research into the experiences of mature students having returned to education, after some time, to a College of Further Education. I am writing to you to respectfully request access to a group of mature students in your college who fulfil these criteria and who might be interested in taking part in this research.

The research study will take the form of a preliminary questionnaire, which will provide me with some background information on the students, and this will be followed by one-to-one interviews with four or five volunteers, where the answers in the questionnaire will be discussed in more detail.

I am enclosing the Participant Information Sheet, which you might like to read, which explains the study and provides more detail about the research. As a result of this study I hope to be able to provide recommendations on how the service can be enhanced for mature students in further education, with the object of attracting more mature students to participate in further education into the future.

Taking part in the research is completely voluntary and confidentiality will be guaranteed: no names of individuals or schools will be used anywhere in the final report; data will be kept anonymous and used for scholarly purposes to produce an MA thesis. If you would like to know more about this research study, please do not hesitate to contact me at the above address, by email at D13122809@mydit.ie, or by phone on _____ and I will be happy to answer any questions or queries you may have.

May I suggest that we perhaps arrange to meet soon and discuss the above when I will gladly explain the whole process to you and answer any questions you may have? I will bring with me the draft questionnaire, draft interview schedule, plus consent form, for you to look at. I will make myself available at a time and place that suits you.

I am myself a mature student having returned to education after a considerable time so I feel I am well positioned to carry out this piece of research.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and the enclosed information and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Graham
Enclosed: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix D

Participant Information Sheet

I am a student on the Master's Degree in Child, Family and Community Studies at the Dublin Institute of Technology. As part of this course, I am carrying out research into the experiences of mature students who have returned to education after a gap. I am looking for volunteers who would be willing to take part in the study. The opinions and voice of the mature students will be central to the study.

The **objectives** of the study are:

- to find out who the mature students are, their level of education, and experience of formal school
- to explore why they came back to education and why they picked a college of further education
- to ascertain how well it is working for them, what could be handled differently, and what barriers, if any, they experienced in getting there
- to discover the differences, if any, between the needs of these students and the younger students
- to identify implications for further education in Ireland
- to add to the body of knowledge in this area.

I am looking for volunteers to take part in an interview. If you agree to be interviewed I would like to meet with you on a one-to-one basis, at a venue of your choosing. The interview should take no more than 30 minutes and, with your permission, I would like to audio-record the interview so that the information you provide can be accurately recorded. You do not have to answer any question in the interview that you do not want to answer. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times; your name and any other personal information will not be disclosed or identified to anyone, nor will it appear in the final report. Consent to participate is completely voluntary and you can choose to withdraw from the process at any stage. You can view the transcripts of your interview if you wish to do so. All data collected will be anonymous and will be stored securely on a password-protected laptop.

The completed work may appear in the DIT library and online at www.arrow.dit.ie. The information collected will be used solely for scholarly purposes including the production of an MA thesis. If you have any concerns or questions, or if you require any further information, please feel free to contact me at any stage at my email address D13122809@mydit.ie

Thank you. Helen Graham

Appendix E

Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey questionnaire. It should take less than 10 minutes to complete. Most of the questions are just tick answers but some questions require a little more information.

1. Age: _____
2. Sex: Female _____ Male _____
3. Marital status (please tick one of the options below):
Single _____ Married _____ Separated _____ Divorced _____
Co-habiting _____ Widowed _____
4. Present occupation:
Working _____ Unemployed _____ Homemaker _____
Student _____ Other _____
5. Nationality: _____
6. Do you have children? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, please state the number of children, relevant to the age brackets given:

Age	Number of children
0 - 5 years old	
6 - 10 years old	
11 - 15 years old	
16 - 20 years old	
21 years and over	

7. At what age did you leave primary/secondary school? _____
8. Please tick your highest level of attainment at primary/secondary school:
Primary school _____ Secondary school _____ Junior Certificate _____
Leaving Certificate _____ Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) _____
Other (please specify)

9. What courses have you taken since leaving primary/secondary school?

None _____

10. After you left primary/secondary school and before you came back to further education, what was your main occupation?

11. Why did you come back to education at this time?

12. Why did you choose this course?

13. Why did you choose this college specifically? (You may tick more than one option)

It was recommended _____ It is convenient to where you live _____

The reputation of the college _____ From professional advice _____

Good programme/subjects _____ Learning/Fulfilment _____

To improve job prospects _____ Other reason _____ (please give details)

14. When you finish this course, do you intend to go on to do another course?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, please give details of what course you intend to go on to (if you already know):

15. What do you consider to be the *most* enjoyable aspects of being a student in further education? (You may tick more than one option)

Learning _____

Course content _____

Staff (i.e. teachers/tutors, administration) _____

Social contact _____

Atmosphere _____

None _____

Other (please specify):

16. What do you consider to be the *least* enjoyable aspects of being a student in further education? (You may tick more than one option)

Course workload _____

Facilities _____

Staff _____

Age difference _____

Financial _____

External commitments _____

None _____

Other (please specify):

17. Please indicate (✓) your level of satisfaction for the following aspects of the college (leave blank any that do not apply to you):

	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Dissatisfied
Subject(s) chosen			
Quality of teaching			
Contact with teachers/tutors			
Teaching methods			
Feedback on assignments			
Entry procedures			
Library facilities			
Crèche facilities			
Guidance/counselling			
Study guidance			

This research project will also focus on the experiences of mature students in further education through interviews.

Would you be willing to take part in an interview?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, please provide a contact telephone number or email address below.

Thank you for your time in completing this Questionnaire.

Appendix F

Interview Schedule

1. What was your experience of primary/secondary school like?
2. How long were you out of education before taking this course?
3. How did you feel about returning to education and was it a difficult decision for you to make?
4. How have you supported your going back to education?
5. Has returning to education impacted your life, for example family, friends, job?
6. Do you feel the needs of mature students differ from those of younger students? If so, how?
7. Would you recommend other mature people to return to education? Why, why not?
8. How do you find the demands of studying, assignments, time management?
9. Did you find that there was support for you as a mature student in the college, if you needed it; for example, help and advice for assignments, or anything else?
10. Is there any advice you would offer anyone thinking of returning to education as a mature student after a gap?
11. Have you anything else you would like to add?

Appendix G

Participant Consent Form

Please tick either yes or no in the space provided.

1. I have read and understood the **Participant Information Sheet** yes___ no___
2. I have received adequate information about this study yes___ no___
3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time yes___ no___
4. I agree to my interview being audio-recorded yes___ no___
5. I am satisfied with issues of confidentiality as explained in
the **Participant Information Sheet** yes___ no___
6. I am satisfied that my questions have been answered yes___ no___
7. I agree to take part in the research study yes___ no___
8. I understand that signing this consent form does not bind me
to participate if I change my mind yes___ no___

Participant's signature _____

Researcher's signature _____

Date: _____

Appendix H

Sample interview

Interviewer: Could you tell me briefly about your experience of formal school, primary and secondary school, was it positive, was it negative?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: How long were you out of education before you came back to do this course here?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: So after a gap that long, how did you feel about returning? Was it a difficult decision to make?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: How did you support yourself coming back to education, was that a difficult issue?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: Has returning to education this time impacted your life, your family, your friends, your job and if it has, how has it impacted?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: Your job?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: So just going back briefly to the career thing so have I got this correct have you kind of found a new career out of having come back here?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: But has it opened up the notion

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: So was that an unexpected spin off from coming in to do this course?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: Coming back as a mature student, especially after a gap, do you feel the needs of mature students differ significantly from younger students?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: In what way?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: Would you recommend other mature people to return to education?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: What about the demands of the studying, the assignments, the time management? Did you find that tricky?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: Did you find that there was support for you as a mature student in the college if you needed it, for example, advice with assignments or anything else?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: Is there any advice you'd offer anyone thinking of returning to education after a gap as a mature student?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: Anything else you'd like to add?

Participant:

[REDACTED]

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

Appendix I
Participant profile from questionnaire

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Marital status	Age leaving school	Highest level of educational attainment (formal schooling)	Reason for returning to education
1	42	M	Single	17	Leaving Certificate	Employment
2	43	F	Married	17	Leaving Certificate	Education
3	46	M	Divorced	15	Primary School	Education
4	58	M	Married	18	Leaving Certificate	Interest
5	57	F	Married	15	Junior Certificate	Education
6	62	M	Married	16	Junior Certificate	To encourage his son
7	55	F	Divorced	18	Leaving Certificate	Education
8	57	F	Married	18	Leaving Certificate	Interest and pleasure
9	54	M	Married	17	Leaving Certificate	Employment
10	57	M	Married	14	Primary School	Education
11	60	M	Married	18	Leaving Certificate	Employment
12	60	M	Married	17	Leaving Certificate	Education
13	52	F	Single	15	Primary School	Education
14	28	F	Single	18	Leaving Certificate	Education
15	38	M	Single	14	Primary School	Education
16	28	F	Single	16	Junior Certificate	Education
17	28	M	Single	16	Junior Certificate	Employment
18	43	F	Married	15	Junior Certificate	To help her children
19	56	M	Single	16	Junior Certificate	Employment
20	41	F	Married	15	Junior Certificate	Employment
21	50	M	Single	14	Primary School	Education
22	29	F	Single	18	Leaving Certificate Applied	No reason given
23	39	M	Single	18	Leaving Certificate	Education

Appendix J

Profile of interviewees

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital status	Age leaving school	Highest level of educational attainment (formal schooling)	Reason for returning to education
Mary	43	F	Married	17	Leaving Certificate	Education
Kevin	46	M	Divorced	15	Primary school	Education
Ben	58	M	Married	18	Leaving Certificate	Interest
John	57	M	Married	14	Primary school	Education
Liam	60	M	Married	18	Leaving Certificate	Employment
David	60	M	Married	17	Leaving Certificate	Education
Kate	52	F	Single	15	Primary school	Education

Appendix K

Sample coding (by topic)

Category: Academics

Theme: Challenge

“I was very surprised actually that it was as academic as it was. I didn’t realise it was going to be academic at all. It was a bit of a shock but you know what it was very good because it kind of pushed me out of my comfort zone a little bit you know, a bit, a lot actually.” (Kate)

“I always felt that the academic side might catch up on me. So when I started and I got to the class I realised just how far back in the class I was. I’d say out of 22 I was probably the least experienced person in the class. I knew from the very start because I always find that when you are in a room with people you’re inclined to within your own mind you nearly grade yourself and you put yourself into a box and you say well you know I’m in that category this is the category for me and I knew and I can remember thinking this is going to be hard but I still wanted to do it. I still I knew I could never be as good as probably a lot of the other guys but I sort of had to find my own little spot there. I always felt that the academic side might catch up with me.” (John)

“I never done an assignment to be honest. I tell a lie, I was in the FCA for 12 years and I was a corporal so I had to do a lesson plan. So you kept your lesson plan for life. So you done one out in the square and one out in the classroom and you just went off then. That’s how you learnt it. Em the brief thing, you know, some people don’t really understand. I didn’t really understand when I was given the brief. You know, em, I’d have to go off and ask someone like what do they mean by that. I’ve done probably four or five assignments three times which I did. You know, and I’d have to go off and ask someone I’m after doing that this it’s the third time you’re not doing it right.” (Kevin)

“There was an awful lot of academic stuff. Being older I found you know harder to study in the evenings but when I allocated the time and I made space for myself I did better. Exams were hard I found. I don’t know what your experience is and my advice to older people would be exams are going to be very hard because trying to remember that guy’s name or trying to remember that theory anything like that is a lot harder when you are over 50 or 60.” (Liam)

“I did the first assignment I got the first essay it got em in first year I realised it was the first time in 38 years that I had ever written an essay and it was a 2000 word essay. I’m not sure I’ve ever written a 2000 word essay before then I dunno. I forgot what Leaving Cert essays were but that was the last time I wrote an essay. Now having said that because I’ve worked and that I’ve kinda my writing isn’t bad you know sending emails and letters to people and so on so my writing was good enough. But I was especially the first time it was and it was also that psychological block of starting it and I kinda left it quite late the first one. I left it quite late and I mean I got it in and I got over the line and so on but it was difficult in that way.” (Ben)

“It surprised me that it was quite as intense as it actually turned out to be. I was expecting it to be a little bit of a doddle you know. Em I suppose I have been involved in science and engineering and IT and things like that all my life which are areas which are quite demanding really both intellectually and in terms of pace of change and things like that and I’ve always kind of viewed Arts as being a kind of an easy option [laughs] and I suppose now having been involved in the Arts side of things I am beginning to realise, if you’re going to make a success

of that you have got to be as equally committed to this as to any other career option you might have been involved in you know.” (David)

“I always find studying difficult studying a topic I find very difficult but what I’m doing is very practical and that part I love. Trying to word things in a way that I don’t speak you know where I just want to tell somebody in my own language and em so they’re things that I found difficult and I always knew that I would.” (Mary)

Category: Referencing

Theme: Challenge

“The biggest thing for me was having to learn how to write an essay how to reference it. I’d never even heard of that before that’s the big thing for me.” (Kate)

“I really enjoy listening to the lectures I really enjoy that but to go off and start finding books actually the hardest part is referencing in the Harvard referencing system [laughs] that is the hardest part for me that at the end of it all takes so much time for me.” (Mary)

“[Tutor] had to come down even referencing so. My own son as I said done IT he says look you have to learn yourself I can’t tell you. So I had to go off and ask people how do you reference and he actually said to me when it was coming up to the last few weeks he just clicked on the computer and said how would you reference that there look that’s the address. I says, why didn’t you tell me that weeks ago; you have to learn yourself.” (Kevin)

Category: Finances

Theme: Challenge

“My wife works now she does a job share. She’s actually just finished college as well and em I and also I was doing bits and pieces of work during the holidays and like I said during summer I’d be very busy and you know bringing in a fair bit then but yeah so we got by.” (Ben)

“It was it was difficult. I didn’t get any grants you know I was scrimping by really to be honest with you em yeah. I’d sometimes do a little bit of face painting gigs on the side so I was getting one or two of them the odd time and maybe a few little gigs here and there so not a lot now but there was a little bit of work coming in the odd time.” (Kate)

“Actually it was because I was a full-time [names occupation] and I was only doing it part time that’s all I was doing it for two years part time so the hours I was losing out during the week I’d have to try and stay out later at the weekend to make me money up you know. That’s the only way I could really do it you know.” (Kevin)

“Financially I suppose the financial thing was getting across town and getting in to college. There were no books as such I suppose there was some expense for printing and things like that. Em I’d be good at going to public libraries and looking up books or looking at them online rather than buying them. I’d be tight enough with finances that way. So it wasn’t really a financial burden. I didn’t go to the conferring ceremony pay 90 quid for a gown or anything like that so that wasn’t an issue either. Financially it has hurt me a bit because of the travelling over to [college] it was more awkward and I suppose I missed out on some work opportunities, I’m just talking about a day here a day there rather than career or anything. So em there has been things to pay but I’d say on balance it’s been a very positive experience.” (Liam)

“It wasn’t a big issue thankfully because my husband has a good job. It can be a very big issue for people yeah.” (Mary)

Category: Computer competence

Theme: Challenge

“Younger kids they’re coming straight from school a lot of them so they’d have a lot of skills that we wouldn’t have like computer skills. The whole computer thing was a bit daunting for me at the beginning but we all helped each other with whatever skills we had which was really, really, really positive really good.” (Kate)

“To me now I missed the whole the whole Internet thing is a gap in my life so when I went back I done some computer classes where I had to ask where the button was. I worked in a quarry for 35 years never had the need for a computer. I seen them around but like you know when I left school but sorta just before I left work I took up photography and at that stage I did buy a computer but I had done courses and people assume you know how to use a computer. They think you know people think that everyone knows how to use a computer and you know it’s not the case. But young people are extremely good at it and you know they take it for granted the knowledge they have they think everyone has the same and they haven’t. Like I did the one course and there was one young lad there and a couple of older guys you know only for him we’d have been left behind because we were sorta asking him because as I say that little bit the high tech stuff you know it wasn’t part of my life. You know when I got here you know part of the interview would have been can you use a computer. You know that was you had to be you know have some sort of knowledge of a computer and to be honest with you like you know the knowledge I had and the knowledge that they expected here was totally different like using programmes you’d never used before and software like you know when you left here you were delving a bit deeper when you got home just to try and keep up. And like as time went on we found we were all doing the same thing none of us were really up to date on it.” (John)

“As regards facilities and the college themselves I mean I never felt the need to go and em kinda things I would say not I’m quite technologically savvy but a lot of people my age aren’t. Mind you a surprise to me was that some of the young people aren’t either. Everyone says young people are whizzes and in my experience that’s not necessarily the case. But em I would say that a lot of mature students have problems there and in fact I know I can think of one person that I was very friendly with really can just about use a word processor and you needed to do a bit more than that and word processor is basically a typewriter like really nothing you know. So things like that I’d say aren’t catered for but having said that I didn’t go looking.” (Ben)

“..... where somebody is coming from a background where they have had no experience whatsoever of technology or of computers and a lot of [names elements of course] nowadays is computer based and em I know you know some of the tutors have been particularly patient with those people and have taken time out with them and spent hours with them you know, bringing them through to a point where they can slowly but surely kind of begin to learn and em give them a bit of a leg up and support and things like that you know.” (David)

Category: Time management

Theme: Challenge

“At the beginning the first three months was tough of the first year was very tough and I was actually just going home and thinking ah grand and getting into my normal routine and forgetting about the homework and I’d say no I’ll leave it on the long finger and I’ll do it and then I realised when the assignments started coming in actually I can’t be doing that you know but I did manage my time well em I used to come in early in the morning some days that I didn’t have to be in til 11 and I’d come in early when the girls were gone to school and I’d come in early and I’d do some of the studying in here you know so I found that easier I found studying at home was really tough because you get distracted very easily especially when you are a mother you start seeing things that oh I didn’t do this washing and I didn’t do this and you get very distracted you know so I think you’ve got to find the space and I found it easier to study in college or in the library the library’s a very good place for me to study the library was a godsend really.” (Kate)

“Yeah time management with the business, with the kids, when you have kids your time is just not your own and that’s just life and em eh it was you know some way my time management wasn’t good. I was finishing things at all hours of the morning but you put up with it and you get on with it and you do it because you know it’s a short term thing so that’s the assignments and time management.” (Mary)

“I would have been used to working in teams and groups they call it teams now but they are groups of people and one of the frustrations in college would have been, and this is where the time management comes in, trying to satisfy somebody who maybe is working who is in doing the same course in college as me but is [occupation mentioned] 8 or 9 hours a day or 60 hours a week or 50 hours a week and he doesn’t seem to show up at the same time I show up and certain mismatching and that, that aspect of the time management I felt a lot of my time was wasted. Time management wise, I wasted a lot of time having meetings where they were distracted and couldn’t focus their attentions maybe because they were doing the wrong course or they just saw it as a means to go somewhere else and weren’t really interested in the subject matter or whatever. That was more time wasting. Em I find myself it’s the old somebody was saying it there at the weekend when I was going to study I always said that I’ll do 2 hours but I have to start at 5 o’clock or 6 o’clock not at 10 to 6 or you know to get an extra 20 minutes or something but I did find as it went on that my time management or my discipline got better.” (Liam)

“I was going home I was going into college and going home to do my work in me job and going home to do my assignments I was sitting there all night. Look I was going to be up all night anyway so that’s the way I had to be.” (Kevin)

“I suppose I had this view when I was coming back that oh you know you do about 20 hours in the week in college and sure that’s only a part time job, it’s only half time sort of thing you know the rest of the time is all your own but in fact you have to put in at least another 20 or 30 hours on top of that outside of college and then you’ve got assignments and projects on top of that which involve research and writing up, doing write ups and things like this which you’ve to submit so god I mean I would say, I mean I wouldn’t be surprised if I’d been putting 50 or 60 hours a week in the whole thing you know..... I was expecting it to be a little bit of a doddle you know. Em I suppose I have been involved in science and engineering and IT and things like that all my life which are, areas which are quite demanding really em both intellectually and in terms of the pace of change and things like that and I’ve always kind of viewed Arts as being a kind of an easy option [laughs] and I suppose now having been involved in the Arts side of things I am beginning to realise, if you’re going to make a success of that you have got to be as equally committed to this as to any other career option you might have been involved in you know.” (David)

Category: Needs compared to younger students

Theme: Personal experiences

“Well I’m not I wouldn’t say we are not catered for but certainly colleges are set up mostly with younger people in mind you know which you know it’s mostly younger people are there that’s fair enough but em. For example em the students union for example I know all the things they run I had I know where the students union office is I’ve never set foot inside it and I wouldn’t have any idea of anyone who has anything to do with the students union I wouldn’t have an idea and I’m pretty sure the other mature students that I know would be in the same boat as me someone might have been pointed out to them sometime like your man from the students union so that also includes things like whatever entertainments they are putting on or whatever kind of you know just kind of down time stuff that they are putting on completely irrelevant to me..... I kind of got on really well with all the younger students in my class or in my year but ended up kinda hanging out with people in or around my own age the mature students you know.” (Ben)

“I had to work and then you see these other people coming in here and that they are coming in to learn and they’re on the labour and their things would differ from me you know if they didn’t come in one day I don’t know I was told that they would have to inform the labour that they didn’t come down. Where it’s different for me I was coming in an doing my days in college or half days in college and go straight into work an try and catch back up you know what I mean.” (Kevin)

“I suppose I wouldn’t have the energy I found it hard to have the energy to go out and go listen to a concert on a night; I’m gauging myself against guys in their 20s in class who are able to go to concerts or go away for the weekend to a festival and come back and talk about it the next week. Partly I don’t have the resources here because of married with kids but em. I suppose ageism wise that if I was young and single or young and whatever dating I’d find it a lot easier maybe to do some parts of it but then again maybe the young and dating might take a lot of my time as well you know. I see some of the young fellas 18/19 years of age and they get caught up in watching video games or there’s a new thing out Netflix and I would have the old maturity to discipline myself and say I’m gonna need five hours sleep tonight or six hours sleep there’s no point in starting watching a movie or something.” (Liam)

“I’m doing it for enjoyment now and I’m leaving my options open and completely open minded as to what comes out of it I have no idea what’s going to come out of this.” (Mary)

“They think you know people think that everyone knows how to use a computer and you know it’s not the case. But young people are extremely good at it and you know they take it for granted the knowledge they have they think everyone has the same and they haven’t. Like I did the one course and there was one young lad there and a couple of older guys you know only for him we’d have been left behind because we were sorta asking him because as I say that little bit the high tech stuff you know it wasn’t part of my life..... To be honest with you as I say when I got here an I seen guys like meself here and women that was encouraging also because you know I’d been on other courses where there’s a lot of young people and you know they are very good and they are very bright and they could sort of leave you for dead you know feel way out of my depth here.” (John)

“I think younger kids don’t you know they’ve more time they don’t see it as like they have to do this course and this is their thing they do it and they don’t really. I wouldn’t say a lot of them would take it seriously as a mature student you could see that with the exams and you could see it with the assignments and you know we were kind of like every assignment we made sure we had it in on time and all that kind of thing it’s a big deal for us you know but younger kids don’t really not that they don’t do the work they’re very capable of doing the work they also are coming from they’re coming straight in from school a lot of them so they’d have a lot of skills that we wouldn’t have like computer skills.” (Kate)

"I suppose having been involved in IT myself, I didn't find the IT aspect of this particularly challenging but I know some of the mature students coming back in might have had no involvement in IT at all and they would have struggled big time with things like being asked to put a presentation together on power point and deliver that presentation and things like this. Em like I say coming from a work environment where you know in my latter years in IBM I was in management position so I was constantly having to do, every day of the week I was doing presentations on one thing or another and putting PowerPoint presentations together. So I mean that aspect of it was easy for me em there were other aspects of the course that were difficult for me." (David)

Category: Level of education and experience of formal school

Theme: Personal experiences

"I suppose over all it was fairly good. Primary school wasn't great in so far as I got bullied at primary school and I missed a certain amount of time from school as a consequence of that. Em, Secondary school was fine. Em we had the Christian Brothers back in those days who, both in primary school and secondary school used to beat us on a regular basis on a daily basis, with the [indecipherable word] as they called it, the leather or whatever. Em but I suppose secondary school em I suppose there wasn't an awful lot of focus though on where you were going to go from there or on what subjects who would like to do or anything like that." (David)

"I was educated in a convent em I just didn't like school I wasn't happy in school em I loved music and art and I was a creative child and of course there wasn't that many creative things going on around me in school so no I didn't and I left school when I was very young so I can't say it was a positive experience no not really." (Kate)

"I didn't actually finish school I actually left in second year I actually I did finish second year it was the first day in third year and me mother couldn't afford to buy me a new uniform so the headmaster called me down one day the first day I started back and he wanted to know where the uniform was I says I told my mother she couldn't afford it so he gave me a load of verbal so I said that's it I'm leaving so I left so that was my I went to school right up until the first day in third year that's as far as I went." (Kevin)

"Secondary school mostly I would say was kind of negative except towards the end I changed schools I went to a couple of different schools towards the end but most of my secondary school I just didn't like I didn't enjoy at all em primary school was fine you know before then I just maybe I dunno was it the school itself or just we weren't a good fit for each other I suppose I think that was it." (Ben)

"I came back to school after possibly being out of school for 40 odd years. Coming back to school was something I always wanted to do. I always felt I missed out. I left school when I was 14. I'd been working since I was 12." (John)

"Positive definitely positive in the sense that I was always the best in class or primary school definitely I was best in class one of the best in class I got a scholarship to go to secondary school because there wasn't free education when I went into it it came in the year I was leaving primary actually and then as I went on through secondary school I was up near the top range and then as I was coming to me Leaving I would been in the top ten I suppose in any class I was in then so that was positive." (Liam)

"It was positive yeah em I didn't have anything wait til I see em I think in particular in secondary school you have teachers that are not exactly passionate about their subject em and they're there because it's a job and unfortunately you don't learn very much from somebody like that and there were in particular a maths teacher I remember I didn't have

him but thankfully and obviously I won't mention any names and gosh you know he didn't exactly teach but he shouted and roared around the place and threw tables around so that's. I was in em a tech a VEC tech so it was mixed and it was mixed education which is probably a good thing but I'm not sure as a girl in school whether I would have applied myself as much or as much would have been expected of me in that kind of secondary school I think em." (Mary)

Category: Reasons for returning to education

Theme: Personal experiences

"Needed to up-date my skills and education." (23)

"To better myself." (21)

"To further my education." (16)

"Wanted a different career path." (20)

"Redundancy." (9)

"Really want to further my skills." (7)

"To bring out my and further myself, and learn how I could be of service." (5)

"My son refused to do his Leaving Cert, because I never completed mine, so I went back to education to encourage him." (6)

"Interest and pleasure." (8)

"Up-grade my level." (14)

"I was finding it hard to retain consistent work in the above mentioned fields. I made a conscious decision to change career to increase my employment chances." (1)

"Cause I was getting nowhere in life." (15)

"Late in life, to help my children." (18)

"Lack of work. Boost CV for future employment and change of career." (17)

"To learn other skills, to help gain employment." (19)

"To learn." (3)

"To re-educate myself." (13)

"To study." (12)

"Love of [subject] and hope for work from the course." (11)

"I came across the course and was taken by it." (4)

"To improve and enjoy it more." (2)

"I always wanted to go back at some stage." (10)

Category: Student supports

Theme: Quality of education provision

"I don't know if you are aware of Moodle there's a huge amount of information up there with regards to the Harvard referencing system for example there's links up there for that."

A lot of what we've covered is up there em one of the lecturers in particular is just jeez you could ask him anything and he'd nearly do it for you he'd nearly do it for you but he's just an absolute pet but they all were they are all extremely approachable. In the college itself you know I see signs up around you know for example anxiety if you are worried you know talk to us and all that kind of stuff so there is supports there in various levels you know whether it be for the academic side of it or whether it be for the personal social side as well so..... We were given a little booklet in the early days and I'm a fierce for just throwing them there and off you go so there is information in that about the college in general what services are there. Supports yeah there was some information about supports as well but I know you could always go to the lecturers and they are of course absolutely always and very approachable yeah.” (Mary)

“I'd be coming home here to a home situation and it's not exactly conducive to getting a book under your arm and going off and reading in a room quietly on your own. It's hard to get a quiet corner in this house with three kids and they're all active and they are all busy at things so it's not like they were sitting in a corner quietly either so em I suppose if you were in a house with three or four other students and they were all going to college there would be more of a support in a house so maybe colleges should sort of think in terms of would they have study rooms and would they allocate rooms on a sort of rota basis for people who have busy home lives and maybe could do with an extra hour's study time in college or something like that. You know it applies to kids, my daughter we'll be paying extra money so she can stay in school and do her homework and it's costing us three or four hundred quid but that means she gets her homework done every day before she starts studying so em something like that in college would be great if there was a room you could go, quiet time.” (Liam)

“There is a career guidance office there. I never used them I know people have used them em and I have to assume that they are good I never used this guide personally - girl it could be a girl em but I do know people have used them and I know she's very busy so there's a lot of people because it is a worry you know specially when you're not doing so well in the class you know probably your mam or dad send you here to do really well and you're struggling as I say anyway a lot of them went to them and they seem to be very happy with the information they got.” (John)

“I found my tutors were very good em you could go to your tutors and assignments were discussed in the course I was doing we would be given an assignment in fact the assignment would be discussed before we were actually officially given it and em and kind of what we are looking for what the exam board are looking for and so on. And em tutors were very good and you could come back in and say so do we do this, this and this or whatever and it would be discussed and we would have classes where we would discuss the assignment that's coming up or the assignment that needs to be in next week so yeah the tutors were very good at that.” (Ben)

“I didn't know about [names a support person] the first year so em if I'd known about [names support person] I would have been straight to her you know. Em I've been in with [names support person] for the whole second part of the year you know. The college had a school guidance counsellor and only for her and actually [names tutor] sent me to her first.” (Kevin)

“I was lucky to have had a lot of help and support, more from fellow mature students, I feel with these type of courses, because there is a lot to cover, it can be difficult to get help and support from tutors, but as I said we all supported each other.” (Kate)

“Em I think the support comes from the individual tutors in the college. I know there are some structures within the college which we were told about on the first day, like various offices and things like this, such as if you were getting stressed out and things like this who can go and meet up with them and have a chat. I don't know if anyone in the year availed of that.” (David)

Category: Teaching and learning

Theme: Quality of education provision

“It’s a great college the people in it are great the students everybody from the minute you walk in that door they’ve been nothing but helpful to me em and like I wouldn’t have known a lot about [names course] until I got here. I did want to learn about it but I realise now the standard of the tutors that are here they’re the highest I don’t believe there is higher guys in the country, they really are, and so helpful so helpful in every way.” (John)

“I think if you bring someone in the likes of meself that haven’t finished school probably most of these people that have finished school and I hope this helps people that come in after me if they can if the instructors can take the time even at some stage I know they have half days in college they can even keep the other half or even one day just to show them how the assignments should be written out because I was sitting there going I haven’t a clue and as I say I done five of them three times and every time it was handed back to me and I was going you know one of them was two and a half thousand words and referencing as I say that reference I mean some of the stuff I’d copy and paste but then I was told you have to re-thing and I wasn’t great at spelling but I left the brackets on but changed the wording but even if it’s in brackets it’s still plagiarism. I was ... what’s he talking about so I didn’t know what he wanted so if they can explain it you know that’s the way an assignment should be written out just go through it an that’s the way it’s done [indecipherable word]. I think meself because I’d know then right and even if they gave a copy out not the assignment they’re gonna give but that’s how it’s done. I think that would help people.” (Kevin)

“I know you know some of the tutors have been particularly patient with those people and have taken time out with them and spent hours with them you know, bringing them through to a point where they can slowly but surely kind of begin to learn and em give them a bit of a leg up and support and things like that you know. Em like I say I don’t think it’s there at an institutional level but I think it’s there at a individual/instructor level and em I suppose like everything to do with human beings that kind of level of support can vary by the individual as well but for the most part I think it’s been em the level of the support from the individual tutors has been very, very good you know. And my view has probably gone beyond where they really needed to go you know.” (David)