Lifelong Learning as a Transformative Endeavour:

How do part-time mature learners make sense of barriers and opportunities in Higher Education?

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Ph.D in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement

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To my parents Michael and Kathleen Collins

My first and best educators

"The real *voyage* of *discovery* consists *not* in *seeking new* landscapes, but in having *new* eyes." –

Marcel Proust, La Prisonnière

'We live in a time of constant change - in liquid modernity - and this has created a rapidly growing need for Transformative Learning: We must be able to constantly change and develop ourselves in order to keep pace with the changes in our environment and life situation:

How to relate to oneself? How to relate to one's existence? How to relate to the outside world as it is today?'

Illeris, K. (2013) 'Transformative Learning and Identity': 573

Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated. Many of the ideas in this thesis were the product of discussion with my supervisor, Dr. Kirsty Finn.

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Abstract

The idea of the 'lifelong learner' has particular currency in Western economies, where citizens are expected to be work-ready at all times. Notwithstanding the "buzziness" of the term, the contemporary realities of engaging in higher education across the life-course are less well known and increasingly under pressure in the context of increasing fees, more limited student support, accessibility, and balancing study with the wider obligations of personal life. Enrolling as a part time, flexible lifelong learning student often requires major adjustments intellectually, socially, emotionally and financially. Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of part-time mature adult students as lifelong learners in HE in Ireland (specifically in the IoT sector), in order to extend knowledge in this area and critically consider the extent to which the notion of the "lifelong learner" is being supported as part-time mature learners make sense of barriers and opportunities in HE. Indeed, whilst we have a considerable understanding of the benefits of adults participating in full-time higher education, far less information is available about what it means to study part-time and the particular challenges this mode of adult participation brings in the contemporary context. Ireland presents an important case study example because whilst it is performing well in relation to the numbers of young people continuing to tertiary level, it has much less reason to celebrate participation rates in lifelong learning. Ireland has only half the average rate of participation of the EU as a whole. Moreover, public policy is focused to encourage further participation and educators are increasingly responsible for finding ways to engage meaningfully with their part-time lifelong learning students. Taking these different issues as a jumping off point, using survey and interview data with existing part time students, this research examines the extent to which mature part-time students feel supported in becoming 'lifelong learners' in Ireland, and what this means in terms of the ways they position themselves, and are positioned by others, in this field. It will look specifically at the development of Lifelong Learning in HE and its current role in Irish education. The barriers to higher education are more numerous than might be imagined for part time mature students. It requires sensitivity and a real vocational commitment to help people to achieve their potential and embrace the opportunities HE brings. Research such as this can provide a roadmap in breaking down those barriers and it would be regrettable if it was not possible to carry this experience forward. The author hopes that the findings from this research will help to achieve this objective of improving the personal outcomes of part-time mature lifelong learning students and those of society more generally.

Acknowledgements

The past four years has been a journey of great discovery.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Kirsty Finn for the continuous support of my PhD study and related research, for her patience, motivation, and immense knowledge. Her guidance helped me during the research and writing of this thesis.

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I am very grateful to the President, Dr. Patricia Mulcahy and Institute of Technology Carlow for supporting me in this journey.

This PhD would not have been possible without the support of my family who have always encouraged me in all of my pursuits and inspired me to follow my dreams. I would like to acknowledge especially my parents Michael and Kathleen and my eight siblings. Finally, I would like to thank my husband Terry who has journeyed with me over these four years and has managed to put up with me and encourage me when at times I needed it. We got married last year and can now look forward to the post-doctoral years of happiness and fun and fulfilling goals and dreams together.

Acronyms

AHEAD   Association for Higher Education Access and Disability

EGFSN   Expert Group on Future Skills

EHEA   European Higher Education Area

FE   Further Education

HE   Higher Education

HEA   Higher Education Authority

IoT   Institute of Technology

IPA   Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

NFQ   National Framework of Qualifications

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QQI   Quality and Qualifications Ireland

THEA   The Technological Higher Education Association

TU   Technological University

TUSEI   Technological University South East Ireland

UNESCO   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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Chapter 1 Introduction and background

Over the past 20 years, the Republic of Ireland has experienced a phenomenal growth in higher education with the numbers of full time students in third level[1] higher education increasing from 115,696 in 1999-2000 to 180,610 in 2016-2017 (Department of Education and Skills, 2018).

Full-time Enrolments by Sector, 2016/17

TOTAL **180,610**

37%

58%

4%

Universities 105,051

Colleges 7,923

Institutes of Technology 67,636
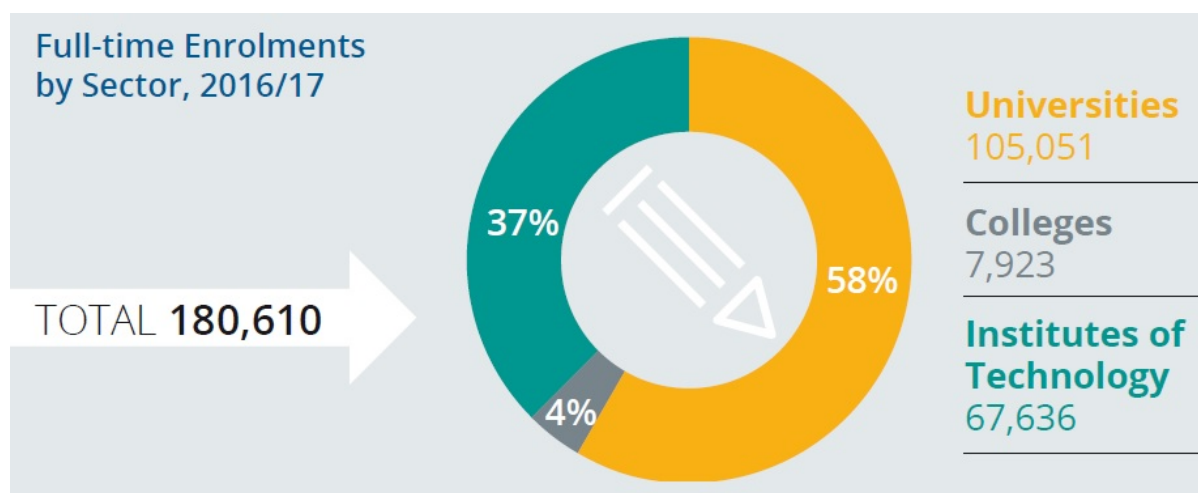
Table 1 Full-time Enrolments by Sector, 2016/17 (HEA Facts & Figures 2016/17)

If Ireland is performing well in relation to the numbers of people continuing to tertiary level, it has much less reason to celebrate participation rates in lifelong learning. Whilst the number of part-time students has also increased, albeit not as dramatically from 32,265 in 1999-2000 to 37,633 in 2016-2017 (Department of Education and Skills, 2018), Ireland has only half the average rate of participation of the EU as a whole.

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[1] The third-level education sector in Ireland consists of universities, institutes of technology, and colleges of education - collectively known as higher education institutions or HEIs. Third-level qualifications are Levels 6-10 in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The Framework is a system of 10 levels which allows national and international educational qualifications to be compared.

Part-time Enrolments by Sector, 2016/17

TOTAL **37,633**

51%
44%
5%

Universities
16,509

Colleges
1,785

Institutes of Technology
19,339
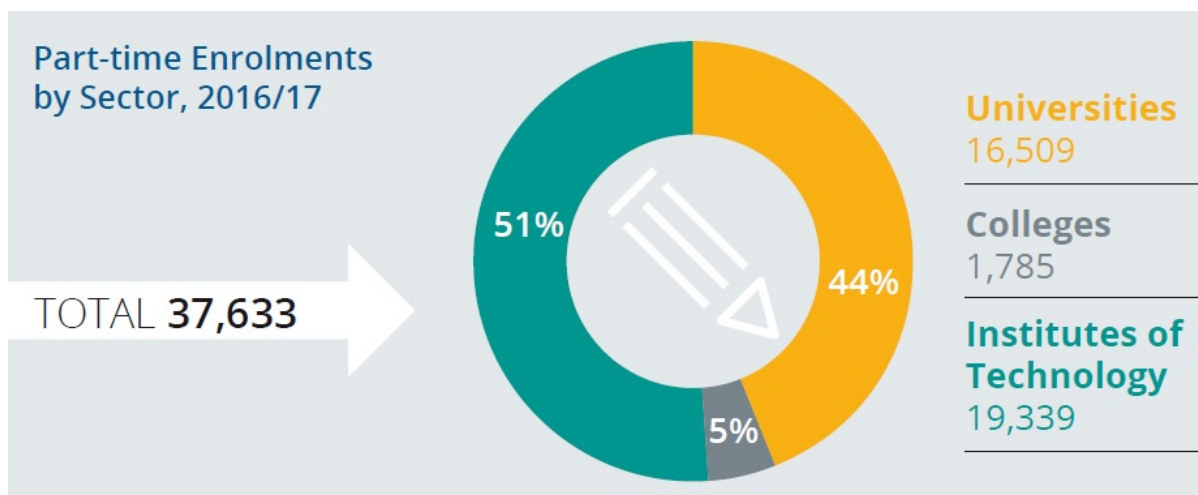
Table 2 Part-time Enrolments by Sector, 2016/17 (HEA Facts & Figures 2016/17)

Part-time, flexible lifelong learning mature students are very different to full-time mature students as they study mainly in the evenings and weekends and may have considerable life experiences and established identities developed through work, relationships or travel as well as community, social and family responsibilities. Going to third level as a part time, mature student potentially requires rather different adjustments – intellectually, socially, emotionally and financially – for older adults than for young university entrants. For those mature students attending part-time rather than full-time and this then requires different strategies for support and inclusion.

The Eurostudent Survey VI (2018) presents the findings of over 20,000 higher education students in Ireland and provides a wealth of internationally comparable demographic, economic and social data. This data provides insights into the quality of life of the increasingly diverse student population in Irish higher education. Mature students account for 22% of the total student population and have an average age of 36.3 years (34.4 for full-time students and 39.2 for part-time students). Of the part-time undergraduate student population, 90% are mature students. Mature students are more likely to attend Institutes of Technology than Universities or their Associate/Affiliate Colleges. Mature students are also more likely to study at Higher Education Institutions outside of Dublin. Most students in higher education are undertaking undergraduate courses (85%). The majority of these undergraduates are studying full-time (77%), whereas only 8% of undergraduates are studying part-time. Postgraduate students form 15% of the total student population and, of this, 8% are studying full-time and 7% are studying part-time.

With this in mind, the aim and purpose of the research is to explore the experiences of part-time/flexible mature lifelong learning students participating in higher education in the Institute

of Technology sector across Ireland. Most of the literature available examines mature students in full-time higher education whilst the search for literature focusing specifically on part-time lifelong learning mature students produced no results. Thus, this research will contribute to the body of research in the field of part-time mature student experiences in higher education with a view to informing and influencing national policy in this area. This will be achieved through a survey of lifelong learning students across five IoT's followed by 12 qualitative interviews which will explore with the students their challenges and reasons for enrolling as lifelong learning students. Each stage of the research process will build upon the previous findings to feed into the interview questions at the final stage of the research. This developmental process will enable the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of part-time mature lifelong learning students so as to ascertain if and how part-time mature students make sense of barriers and opportunities in HE. Although this is a case study relating specifically to Ireland, the findings will be of significance to policy makers in different national contexts at a time when mature, part-time study is on the decline in international circles

> *Our current system of lifelong learning, especially part-time undergraduate provision, is in crisis. Since 2010/11, the number of part-time students starting an undergraduate qualification at an English university has fallen by 61%, to just 100,000 students. Last year alone the numbers declined by more than 8% — the seventh successive year there has been a drop. Today part-timers make up just 20% of all undergraduate entrants. The fall has been greatest among older students, those wanting to do "bitesized" courses, and those with low-level entry qualifications – all typically "widening participation" candidates……………. The decline in demand for part-time higher education study has led to a fall in supply, especially at research-intensive universities and in short, less intensive institutional-credit bearing courses.*

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/lifelong-learning-part-time-undergraduate-provision-crisis [Accessed on 26th January 2018]

Equity of meaningful access to and participation in HE for all throughout life, is a national objective in Ireland. The impact of increasing globalisation, technology, as well as aging demographics, makes the achievement of this objective all the more urgent. In 2011, nearly two-thirds of the Irish adult population had no higher education qualification (CSO 2011). The older the cohort, the starker the statistics. For those under 40 years of age, the picture was brighter and the 2016 census indicates a further improvement. Even among younger cohorts, however, there remains a large number of people who do not have such a qualification. Mature students are more likely than others to study part-time. Yet, in 2015 only 12% of all students enrolled in HEA funded institutions were part-time. This has been a declining percentage since

2004-05, and only 7.2% of Irish 25-64 year olds were recorded as having been involved in any sort of lifelong learning in 2015. The EU average at the time was 11%.

The EGFSN published a report on Lifelong Learning in July 2016 and commented that participation in Lifelong Learning in Ireland at under 7% is trailing behind the EU average of 11%. Niamh O'Reilly, CEO Aontas speaking at 'The Lifelong Learning for All' policy seminar in Dublin in March 2018 said "Ireland's participation rate in lifelong learning is lagging behind that of the European average of 10.8%. We're far from the Government's national target of 10% by 2020" (O' Reilly, 2018). In addition, the gap between Ireland's participation rate and the EU average widened between 2009 and 2014. Speaking at the publication of the report, Una Halligan, Chair of the EGFSN said

> *"The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs is concerned that Ireland's participation in Lifelong Learning has been consistently below the EU average, particularly for those in employment. We have a well-educated and highly skilled labour force, but it is important that people of all ages and at all educational levels participate in learning and up-skilling on an on-going basis in order to sustain their employability. ....For wider society, research points to positive social effects of Lifelong Learning on personal development, health and quality of life, and on civic participation".*

https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Bodies-and-Committees/egfsn/ [Accessed on 21st January 2018].

Indeed, the findings expressed in this thesis are likely to go some way to explaining why lifelong learning is now being challenged and continues to be under threat. The successful application of lifelong learning approaches at higher educational institutions necessitates not only implementation by enthusiastic innovators but also structures are needed in the institutions to support the sustainability and mainstreaming of lifelong learning.

1.1 Lifelong learning and higher education

The increase in adult participation in higher education has been widely debated in both Irish and European policies. This is due primarily to the inclusion of two objectives in the Lisbon agenda[2]. Firstly, a decision was made by member states to raise educational attainment levels within the Union by 2020 (i.e. 40% of the age cohort 30-39 should possess a tertiary education qualification). Secondly, member states agreed to raise the participation rates of adults in

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[2] The Lisbon Agenda was an action and development plan devised in 2000, for the economy of the European Union between 2000 and 2010.

higher education in general to 12.5% in 2010 and to 15% in 2020 (Broek and Hake, 2012, p.397). According to Hazelkorn, in setting these targets Europe wished to be seen as "one of the most competitive knowledge economies in the world" (Hazelkorn, 2015, p.1345). It is recognised by all member states that in order to achieve this objective, serious reforms and change of educational systems and intensified actions to increase participation of mature and adult learners in higher education is required, especially if the concept of "lifelong learning" is to be a reality. Definitions of Lifelong Learning vary according to the perspectives and priorities of the policy makers at a given moment. However, international organisations have provided a set of definitions that are widely used today.

The European Commission defined Lifelong Learning as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective'. It is about acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from the pre-school years to post-retirement (CEC, 2000) and this can occur in formal, non-formal or informal settings. According to the OECD (2004), Lifelong Learning has four main features:

a). A systemic view: The Lifelong Learning framework views the demand for a supply of learning opportunities, as part of a connected system covering the whole lifecycle and comprising all forms of formal and informal learning.

b). Centrality of the learner: this requires a shift in attention from a supply side focus (e.g. on formal institutional arrangements for learning) to the demand side of meeting learner needs.

c). Motivation to learn: requires attention to developing the capacity for 'learning to learn' through self-paced and self-directed learning.

d). Multiple objectives of education policy: the lifecycle view recognises the multiple goals of education (personal development; knowledge development; economic, social and cultural objectives) and that the priorities among these objectives may change over the course of an individuals' lifetime.

Though the term is contested, for the purposes of this research lifelong learning is taken to mean *on-going part-time learning as an adult that takes place in a higher educational context*; which is a definition in keeping with policy. Recommendations to encourage lifelong learning have not gone unheeded in Ireland with higher education playing a significant role in the country's economic development and increasing participation in higher education has become a central platform of policy objectives. This is particularly evident in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Report of the Strategy Group, 2011) whose authors believe that higher education participation amongst adults will increase almost two fold from 2015 to 2030.

Using this definition, Lifelong Learning students in the Irish higher education context are part-time, self-financing students. In the main they are eligible to apply for university and colleges courses once they are at least 23 years of age on 1st January of the year of the proposed study (i.e. classed as a mature student). Each part time applicant tends to be considered on an individual basis, taking into account his/her motivation to do the course, potential to benefit from the course, prior education knowledge, skills gained through work, community involvement, life experiences and other achievements and interests. There is wide evidence that participating in higher education reaps rewards not only on a personal level but also in terms of the benefits for the economy and society in general. Individuals who participate in higher education have improved health outcomes including longevity and healthier lifestyles (Grossman, 2006) in addition to an improved sense of well-being (Schuller *et al.*, 2001).

Nevertheless, while we have a sense of the benefits of adults participating in higher education, there is far less information to hand concerning part time students' perceived challenges to entering higher education. This is recognised within the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (Higher Education Authority, 2015) and also commented on by the Institute of Technology Carlow, within their consultation paper on "Towards the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education". Writing in this paper, the Institute (2015, p.1) suggests that:

> *'While research has focused on access and barriers to education for school leavers from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage, far less has focused on non-traditional/mature students.'*

1.2 Research aims and methods

This research aims to provide insights into understanding the challenges part time mature students encounter in third level underlining the need for educators, colleges, and universities to develop a better understanding of part time mature students experience in higher education that will help fill this knowledge gap. Employing a mixed methods study, including a survey of lifelong learning students across five IoT's and using 12 qualitative interviews with part-time mature students to explore their challenges and motivations as lifelong learning students, this thesis will allow for a deep understanding of the experiences of part-time lifelong learning students in Irish HE. The research is driven by the following objective and questions.

Objectives of the study

The objective is to explore the experiences of part time lifelong learning mature students accessing and participating in higher education. In particular, examining how they make sense of barriers and opportunities in Higher Education. This information will help educators gain an

understanding of how third level institutions can better support part time lifelong learning mature students participating in third level education and also contribute to the body of research in this field.

This objective is then broken down into research questions that are answered by the quantitative and qualitative research or collectively

The research questions are:
1.   What is the experience of being a lifelong learning student in higher education?
2.   How do mature part-time students feel enabled/constrained by the general HE policy context and the particular culture of their institution?
3.   How can higher education institutions help attend to and potentially reduce the differently located challenges/barriers and better support part time students?
4.   What kinds of issues do the experiences of mature part-time HE students, and the changing policy context, present for the future of part-time "lifelong learner"?

The first specific research question is supposed to be answered by the quantitative and qualitative study. It intends to explore the experiences of lifelong learning students in HE. The second and third research questions also rely on both quantitative and qualitative means to answer them whilst the final research question relies on the interviews (qualitative) to answer the question. By answering those questions, a comprehensive picture of how part-time mature learners make sense of barriers and opportunities in Higher Education is expected to be reached.

Much of the current literature explores mature students across a broad range of educational institutions and sectors, but a search for literature which was specifically focused on lifelong learning/part-time mature students (IoT) sector in HE in Ireland yielded no results. Thus, this author is confident that this research will be integral to creating new knowledge to try to address this omission. There is a real need for this study primarily because of the ways part-time mature students represent a hidden experience in HE and partly because of the drive to increase their presence. It will contribute to the body of research in the field of the experiences of part-time mature lifelong learning students and more specifically to determine if the experience of being a lifelong learner affects that experience. It will also inform practice across HE particularly for educators and will influence policy at a national level particularly with regard to supporting lifelong learning part time students in higher education.

1.3 Thesis overview

Chapter one introduces the research field and together with chapter two provides the context within which the research was undertaken. Chapter two specifically examines Irish HE in transition. The configuration of HE is Ireland is explained and the changing context in which HE operates is set out. In a bid to determine the level of commitment existing at a policy level in relation to increasing participation among non-traditional students, a review of the policies of governments at national and European level will be undertaken. A broad conceptualisation of lifelong learning will be provided to frame the thesis.

Chapter three investigates the existing body of knowledge relating to part time lifelong learners. Firstly, it examines the reasons why students return to education as lifelong learners and some of the aspects that affect their decision to pursue higher education. The barriers faced by adults in HE are examined and set out as classified within the literature. Then the literature related to andragogy is examined with particular reference to Lindeman and Knowles, two of the most notable advocates for mature learners (and for this research the closet parallel to part time lifelong learners) of the last century. Following this, seminal educational theorists are discussed namely Dewey (2004) and Mezirow (1990) and various aspects of their individual theories are presented with an emphasis on the aspects of their writings that have influenced the authors philosophy of education. Having reviewed the literature, the author will then design the interview questions and determine data collection and analysis to discover insights to frame recommendations for improving the experiences of part-time mature lifelong learning students.

Chapter four examines the methodological approach for the research. The theoretical framework provides the research context and the *raison d'être* for the utilisation of mixed methods. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, which focuses on experience as opposed to what is consciously known, is established as being the most suitable philosophy for this research. Arguments for and criticisms of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a method are examined and a justification for the use of this method is offered. The assumptions made and the ethical considerations that impacted this research are discussed. The author seeks to be transparent about presuppositions in an effort to try to separate these from the research, with a view to providing an honest and true representation of the participants' actual experience rather than the expected experience. Strategies of inquiry and analysis are presented for both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research. This research used mixed methods; starting with an online questionnaire via survey monkey which sought to obtain a general overview of the experiences of the part-time lifelong learning learner population (*n=7,493*). This survey was also then used to enlist 12 agreeable participants for

semi-structured interviews (*n=12*). The power of the human story is evident from the interviews and was then applied to develop themes and create new knowledge about this group.

Chapter five presents the findings from each of the stages of the primary research and gives context to the new knowledge which may emerge and which can be explored in the sixth chapter.

Chapter six contains the analysis of the findings from the primary research within the context of the existing knowledge and the philosophical framework, and presents the new knowledge that has been created.

Chapter seven draws conclusions from the various aspects of the research, including the literature, the methodology, the findings and the discussion. These conclusions are then taken forward to make a number of recommendations that contribute to the debate about how to improve the experience of part-time lifelong learning students in the Irish HE system.

Chapter 2: Lifelong Learning in Irish Higher Education: Situating Mature Part-Time Students in Context

2.0 Introduction

This chapter will provide the context within which the research has been undertaken. Firstly, the manner in which educational qualifications are awarded will be discussed and the national framework of qualifications is introduced. Secondly, the configuration of the higher education sector in Ireland, with particular emphasis on the changing landscape is explored. Historically the IoT sector has focused on occupational and vocational education and building strong links with industry at a local and regional level more suited to technical, applied learning, while the university sector provided education for the professions and the liberal arts at a small number of national campuses. As the boundaries have become blurred between the two, a new entity, the technological university (TU), is now also on the horizon. Finally, the chapter conceptualises Lifelong Learning and discusses a definition of part-time lifelong learning students so as inform the development of a coherent and viable approach for the chapters that follow.

2.1 Higher Education and the national framework of qualifications

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was set up in 2012 and given the overall responsibility for ensuring quality and consistency of all educational qualifications in Ireland. QQI came into being as a result of the amalgamation of a number of previous awarding bodies including, the National Qualification Authority of Ireland, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Council (HETAC) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). In the area of qualifications, they are responsible for maintaining the ten-level NFQ and are also an awarding body and set standards for awards made in the NFQ. They validate education and training programmes and make extensive awards in the further education and training sector including the Education and Training Boards. They also make awards in higher education mainly to learners in private providers. The universities and institutes of technology largely make their own awards.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Figure 1, below) shows the various levels of awards that are available in Ireland. "The NFQ provides information on the Irish education and training system.............. The NFQ provides a way to compare qualifications and to ensure that they are quality assured and recognised at home and abroad" (National Framework of Qualifications, 2014). The figure below shows which awarding body prior to QQI was responsible for awarding the qualification. Secondary education in Ireland culminates with the Leaving Certificate award which is placed at levels 4 and 5 on the NFQ. For the purpose of

this research the term higher education is taken to mean education at level 6 or higher which previously was under the remit of HETAC, the Institutes of Technology and the national universities.
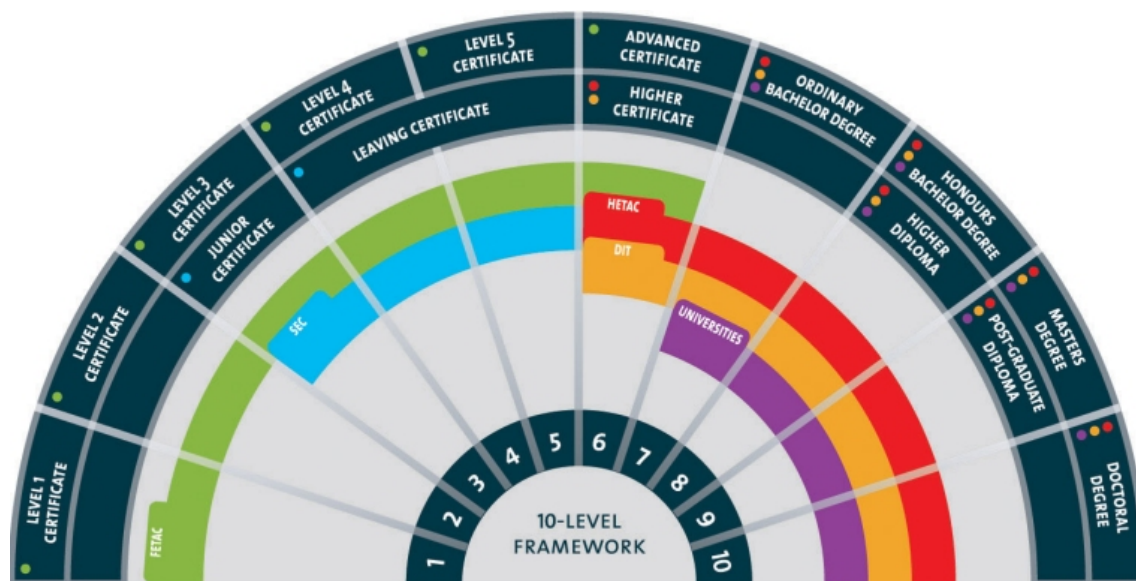
Figure 1. National Framework of Qualifications

2.2 Configuration of higher education in Ireland

"Higher education in Ireland is provided mainly by seven universities, 14 institutes of technology, including Dublin Institute of Technology and seven colleges of education. In addition, a number of other third level institutions provide specialist education in such fields as art and design, medicine, business studies, rural development, theology, music and law." (Department of Education and Skills, 2014)

The IoT's drive a distinctive structure in that they permit students to progress from two year (associate degree programmes) through primary degree to Masters and PhDs. IoT awards are included with the highest award levels of the Irish NFQ which in turn is aligned to the Bologna Framework[3]. IoT's are at the forefront in endeavouring to position the country's contemporary economy with the necessary range of up-to-date and leading skills required by our knowledge-based industries.

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[3] The Bologna Framework as launched in 1999 by the Education Ministers of 29 European countries in an attempt to bring coherence to higher education systems across the continent. It established the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in March 2010. The EHEA is a framework to allow easy comparison between the higher education systems of all participating countries. It comprises agreement on qualification frameworks including the three-cycle system of Bachelor Degree, Master and Doctoral studies.

IoT's engage with regional and national industries and make available programmes from Higher Certificate to PhD level that mirror contemporary and emerging knowledge and practices and promote decision making, critical analysis, entrepreneurship and self-management. They cultivate graduates ready to take on roles, responsibilities and challenges in business, industry, the professions, public services and society. The mission statement of the Institute of Technology Carlow reflects this fact:

"*to Engage, Learn, Challenge and Innovate is articulated through an educational environment and context where learners pursue studies in higher education and research up to doctoral level. Through a culture of enquiry, innovation and excellence we challenge our learners, staff, global collaborative partners and other stakeholders to create, apply and share knowledge and values in a supportive and vibrant university-level Institute. Engagement with business, government, community and voluntary sectors defines the Institute's leadership role in the development of our region and nation (available at http://www.itcarlow.ie/resources/mission-statement.htm).*

Technological Higher Education Association of Ireland (THEA) was established in 2016 as the body to represent the 14 IoT's in Ireland. It describes Ireland's Institutes of Technology as "flexible and dynamic university-level Institutes focused on teaching/learning, purpose-driven research, and public service. They are recognised as a major success story in Irish education" (available at http://thea.ie/about-us/about-us accessed on 10th April 2018).

As such, IoTs have long been closely aligned to the value of higher education, and have provided access to those in society who traditionally have had greatest difficulty in entering higher education. This is one of the greatest strengths that IoTs have in comparison to the private colleges and universities. This is one of the main reasons why this research is taking place within the IoT sector.

2.3 The National Strategy for Higher Education
The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) espoused long term, high level strategic objectives for the entire Irish Higher Education sector and has set an agenda for transformation in the sector, which has continued to gain impetus. It is clear that globalisation and the increased focus of the Irish Government on the creation of a 'knowledge economy' have also influenced policy makers in this regard.

The National Strategy called for a "*coherent set of higher education institutions, each of significant strength, scale and capacity*". It demanded enhanced collaboration and institutional consolidation, particularly in the IoT sector and envisaged that "*based upon*

demonstrated strong performance against mission-relevant criteria.....some could apply for re-designation as technological universities". The National Strategy clearly stated that this was aimed at "*promoting institutional mergers and ensuring advanced institutional performance*".

In 2012, the HEA published *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape.* This strategy document detailed the process and criteria which IoTs would have to undertake to apply for designation as a TU and included a requirement to merge with at least one other IoT before TU status can be conferred.

2.4 The current changing context for Higher Education

Ireland has experienced an extraordinary socioeconomic transformation in the past five decades, from a conservative pre-industrial to a post-industrial high-tech economy and open society. Irish higher education has been at the centre of this transformation, providing skilled personnel with credible credentials, acting as a vital source of new knowledge and innovative thinking, contributing to innovation, attracting international talent and business investment into regions, acting as an agent of social justice and mobility and contributing to social and cultural vitality. Currently the Irish government is preparing for the future, planning for the significant population changes that will occur and envisaging a superior national infrastructure.

The landscape of higher education within Ireland is also changing rapidly, shaped by well-established national and international drivers of change; linked to the knowledge economy and global competitiveness; enabled by new national policy and legislation that prioritises institutional diversity and mission distinctiveness; and underpinned by the formation of new alliances and new types of institutions through merger and re-designation. The Irish *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* acknowledges that Irish higher education is at a point of transition and calls for a transformation of the higher education system better to achieve defined national social, cultural and primarily economic goals. National strategy provides guidance and direction on system and institution-level change. Social and cultural changes, intellectual developments, economic pressures, and significant shifts in ideological framework have all impacted on how policy-makers, the public, and indeed the communities within understand the purpose and role of universities in contemporary society; older models of the university and of university education have given way to new, "modern" and "modernised" kinds of institutions of which there are markedly different expectations than heretofore. These expectations are *inter alia* within the domains of organisation and governance, teaching and teaching approach, research effort and social and economic impact. Policy-makers in Ireland and in Europe have embraced these new understandings and their related sets of

expectations and Irish higher education policy—in the shape of the creation of Technological Universities—reflects this.

Universal Higher Education and World Class HEIs
- Equality, Diversity and Diversity as a political goal
- Emergency of rankings and impact on system priorities
- Diversity and sectoral identity within the binary system
- QA/QE—Accountability / Assessment

Economic Context
- International developments Brexit/Elections Policy change
- Project Ireland 2040/Regional and National Investment Proposition
- Demography and participation
- Employer requirement
- Value added agenda

System Governance and Management
- Clustering
- Mergers
- Technological Universities
- European University Networks

Funding
- Uncertainties regarding State funding
- Diversified income sources constantly changing/very competitive
- Competition for intellectual talent

Digital Technologies
- Higher education provision in the digital age—institutional positioning on the blended learning spectrum
- Virtual infrastructure, digital literacy and collaborative partners
- QA/QE, Workload Models and Structures

Integration with Industry
- Indigenous innovation and FDI for regional and national development
- Collaborating for talent and growth - step changes in HEI/Industry partnerships
- Industry-based learning—a source of competitive advantage

Table 3. Overview of the landscape of Higher Education in Ireland 2018

Today, the higher education institutions in Ireland cater for a total learner population of 225,000. The latter is estimated to rise by a further 30% by 2030. National policy envisages a smaller number of larger institutions in the future. The indications are that a small number of TUs will develop through merger/consolidation from existing IoTs in the short term, with unmerged institutes eventually assimilated into one or other of the new universities. Currently, there are four consortia working towards merger / consolidation and designation. These are the South East TU, TU4Dublin, Munster TU and Connacht Ulster Alliance. The South East Technological University of Ireland (TUSEI), involving a partnership between Institute of Technology Carlow and Waterford Institute of Technology, will comprise a multi-campus university with campuses at Carlow, Kilkenny, Waterford, and Wexford. This author works at the Institute of Technology Carlow and is part of the steering group for the TUSEI.

On the 21st March 2018, the Technological Universities Act 2018 was signed into law by Uachtarán Na hÉireann, Michael D. Higgins. This provides the legislative framework upon which TU development consortia can now progress their applications. This is an important milestone for Irish higher education and particularly for the Institute of Technology sector. Carlow and Waterford Institutes of Technology are actively engaged in the process of further defining the framework for the delivery of the Technological University for the South East. The

consortium partners, with the support of Government and the Higher Education Authority, plan to have all the preparatory work completed by mid-2018, for a formal application for Technological University designation in the second half of 2018.

Project Ireland 2040 (National Development Plan 2016-2017, February 2018) has presented the national priorities for higher education provision which includes the establishment of the multi-campus TUSEI. This is significant for this thesis in that the TUSEI has the potential to harness areas of specialisation and competitive strength, building regional capacity and innovation, enhancing human capital, supporting social, cultural and environmental sustainability and acting as a global gateway to attract investment and talent to the region. It will allow new spaces to be created, new organisational forms and new tools for the creation and practical application of knowledge in the region and beyond. Part-time lifelong learners will benefit from new opportunities to study, research and live in the region and, as such, society will benefit from enhanced human capital through new businesses, products and services, new employment opportunities, improved societal health and lifestyle, and increased cultural activity. This opportunity can be seized through a co-ordinated regional approach involving higher education, business, government and society, working together to generate a self-perpetuating innovation ecosystem.

As we embark on the next stage of the development of HE in Ireland, we are operating in a rapidly changing external environment. A strong economy, rapidly growing regional population, the new Technological University Act 2018, numerous national reviews, strategies and action plans, and geopolitical shifts (including Brexit) will all influence our journey to support part-time learner's access to a dynamic, adaptable, innovative and high-quality education system which will ultimately help part-time mature students access higher education. It will provide leadership as the cohesive force at the centre of knowledge, research and innovation in the region and will also facilitate an external focus allowing the region to capitalise on other economic drivers, nationally and internationally. It will cultivate future generations of active and engaged citizens across the country and will be a driver of social inclusion, social justice and of cultural and artistic activity in the coming decades. We are creating the Technological Universities of the future to support and enhance learner's access higher education. This transformation in Irish HE should offer part-time mature students greater access and participation in HE.

2.5 The economy and higher education

HE is one of the key drivers of growth performance, prosperity, and competitiveness in national and global economies. HE institutions not only deliver tertiary education and ongoing

skills training, but also provide a lively research environment that produces innovations with marketable applications. The relationship between higher education and the economy came sharply into focus with the economic crisis from 2008. Governments around the globe became increasingly worried about the viability of public funding for the HE sector and there was a growing awareness of the necessity to accomplish greater efficiencies. Global rankings and standings are to the forefront in Institutions competing internationally for funding and students. Prospective students are more worried about access to HE, its benefits and its cost. However, side by side with this is a mounting fear around the meaning of and the nature of HE, especially the prominence given to its economic function over and above the other roles of HE. The current trend towards instant gratification in all aspects of society has not overlooked education. In theory in our world instant gratification is possible through technology, online education and game-based learning. Increasingly there is a need for educational institutions to justify their activities and prove their worth in the market. As outlined previously, the HEA which is the external body responsible for monitoring the quality of third level education in Ireland is also responsible for the allocation of budgets. Arguably the two functions are inextricably linked; that is to say higher education institutions are required to demonstrate their contribution to individuals and society in order to secure further funding. Governments and international agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) are encouraging a value-for-money approach in educational institutions. Since the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 in 2011, the Irish government has been trying to lead a more coherent governance and funding system that strikes a balance between state control and institutional autonomy. The reform process set up a new performance framework system (2014) and a new governance framework (2016) aimed at improving responsibilities and support accountability based on a shared understanding of roles by all higher education stakeholders, including the regulatory, funding and controlling bodies, institutions and employers. The strategic performance framework was designed to promote a more responsive higher education system with greater accountability for public investment and to guide third level institutions towards demonstrating value for money by delivering national policy objectives. To achieve this, HEI's have to sign institutional performance compacts, which are agreed with the HEA as part of the annual strategic dialogue process (Estermann, Kupriyanova and Casey, 2018). Biesta (2009) argues that the measurement of educational outcomes needs to be used with care and that international comparison reports which often enlighten governmental policy tell us little about inputs to the education system and that a blame and shame policy is not necessarily one that is useful in identifying ways in which education can be improved. Furthermore, he argues that there should be ongoing discussion about what the ends of education, particularly public

education actually are. He writes "in all cases a concern for good education rather than a concern for effective education or for learning as such, that is without any specification of the learning "of what" and "for what", should be central to our consideration" (ibid: 11).

The National Competitiveness Council (NCC) – the Government's independent advisory council monitoring the competitiveness of the Irish economy published its annual report Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2018 in December 2018 stating, "The presence of a talent pipeline combining knowledge and skills is key to improving Ireland's productivity performance. Increasingly companies prioritise the availability of skills when establishing and further developing their base of operation" (2018: 13). If the lifelong learning agenda gets framed first and foremost in terms of economic requirements – we risk undervaluing the benefits that come from learning and education itself and the more interpersonal skills, such as creativity, empathy, understanding and self-reflection that HE institutions foster and that are more important than ever in the workplace today. We must be proud advocates of these benefits alongside those that are more immediately measurable. A key role of higher education institutions is to allow students to learn transferable skills that will help them succeed in the workplace, further strengthening the knowledge-based economy.

2.6 The emerging future context for higher education

Higher education levels are related to increased and longer employment / economic participation, social engagement, informed political participation as well as better health outcomes (see, for example, UNESCO 2016). HE is therefore fundamental to the health and wellbeing of both individuals and society as a whole. It is well established in research, however, that the meaningful accessibility of higher education has often been limited to certain sections of society.

Higher education is under pressure to effectively and continuously respond in a world that is changing rapidly, and at an ever-increasing pace. There are two main interrelated drivers of this:
- The increasing diversity of learners requiring meaningful access to higher education on a recurrent basis throughout the lifecycle.
- The changing socio-economic context characterized and impacted by globalisation and technological development, with implications for wealth distribution, climate change and migration, and aging demographics in Ireland and the EU.

These circumstances are fundamentally changing the organisation of both our society and our economy. As we have seen in both the EU and the USA in recent times, for example, the

situation has implications for our political system, civic participation and identity (Van de Werfhorst *et al.*, 2004; Stubager 2010). In terms of employment, the EU (2015) had forecast that by 2020 35% of jobs worldwide will require high-level skills and qualifications, 50% will require those at mid-level, and only 15% will require low-level skills. It now estimates that by 2025, 50% of jobs will require high-level skills (EC 2017). This trend is likely to intensify as time passes.

Because of this process of constant and rapid change, people will need to be highly adaptable and competent lifelong learners. "These developments change daily life, both at work and leisure. Society and economy rely heavily on highly competent people while competence requirements are changing; in addition to good basic skills (literacy, numeracy and basic digital skills) and civic competences; skills such as creativity, critical thinking, initiative taking and problem solving play an increasing role in coping with complexity and change in today's society" (European Commission 2018:3). They will require transversal skills fundamental to participating in most situations in addition to discipline or profession-specific skills and knowledge required for any particular area of competence. These will need to be enhanced and renewed continuously for much of our adult lives.

In Ireland, according to the 2016 Census (CSO 2016) 56.2% of people aged 15 to 39 possessed a third level qualification, in comparison to 18.9% of those aged 65 and over. The proportion educated to primary level only for those aged 65 plus was 39.7% showing the older the cohort, the starker the statistics. It is clear that there remains a large percentage that has not achieved higher education awards. It is also estimated that by 2026 there will be c. 855,000 people in retirement. By 2046, it is estimated that there will be in the region of c.1.42 million retired people, with 477,000 over 80 years of age (Department of Education and Skills 2015). Younger cohorts will be reducing in numbers. This, in itself, indicates the change in who will be undertaking what in our society and economy in the coming years, and for how long.

In addition to this, there are communities for whom higher education remains an elusive expectation due to geographic, cultural or economic reasons. This continues to contribute to an unequal society, something that is likely to become more pronounced with the economic and technological changes occurring worldwide, and related trends in wealth distribution. HEA statistics for the number of part-time students in HEA funded institutions also, perhaps, raise a number of questions. For example, why do there appear to be so few people taking part-time higher education courses when there is such a large number of people without a higher education award in the general adult population? Why has the number of part-time students in publicly funded higher education as a percentage of total enrolments been reducing for over

a decade? Why do universities appear to be underperforming in terms of the number of participating part-time students in comparison to Institutes of Technology?

2.7 Policy issues

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

2.8 Irish higher education policy and lifelong learning

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 states that the "capacity of higher education has doubled over the past 20 years and will have to double again over the next twenty" which clearly indicates higher levels of participation currently and expected (Department of Education & Skills, 2011b:6). The strategy identifies the importance of the

experience of students in first year and argues that first year curricula should be designed to not only provide foundation in subjects for subsequent years but also serve to engender employability and lifelong learning outcomes (Johnston, 2010 cited in Department of Education & Skills, 2011a:56). The report supports the use of flexible learning delivery including the provision of full and part-time courses, classroom-based, blended, online and accelerated learning (Department of Education & Skills, 2011a: 54) based on the expectation that the bulk of the increase in demand for higher education will come from part-time mature students with the number of school leavers only increasing slightly (2011a:44). The report acknowledges that Ireland's performance in lifelong learning has been undermined by the difficulties of the funding system for higher education. Despite the funding difficulties, when benchmarked against OECD systems, the Irish system in 2011 was performing at higher than average outcomes at funding levels that are somewhat below average (2011a:110).

The Irish governmental tone had changed significantly with the publication of the National Recovery Plan 2011-2016. The national recovery plan does not make any reference to mature students or part time lifelong learning students and suggests that costs in education will be reduced through an increase in the student contribution costs for third level education (Department of Finance, 2011:12). In fact, the report advises that the "25-34-year-old age cohort in Ireland has a higher level of formal qualification than the OECD average, while the proportion of the population aged 20-24 with at least an upper second-level education is the highest in the EU15" (2011:23). While these are proud achievements for the country, they do not eradicate the need to ensure that part time lifelong learning students are facilitated at higher level and encouraged to avail of further education in order to improve the quality of the country's human capital, especially if our knowledge economy is expected to continue to be the main driver for economic recovery. In the same year the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) indicated that the economic downturn from 2008 had magnified the importance of lifelong learning and workforce development. This lack of consistency between governmental departments illustrates the extreme difficulty in trying to establish a comprehensive education policy that will facilitate mature part-time students in Irish higher education.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) which is the statutory planning and policy development body for higher education in Ireland states that their role "is to create a higher education system that maximises opportunities and ensures a high quality experience for students" (Higher Education Authority, 2014a). They state that the student should be at the centre of all activity to ensure that the education system can deliver on its individual, social and economic responsibilities. While this is very encouraging in terms of ensuring that all students in higher

education in Ireland have a positive experience, it is difficult to ascertain how this is realised on the ground. Their performance evaluation framework profiles Irish higher education institutions on the following criteria: student numbers, disciplinary mix, participation, internationalisation, teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, staff, financial and space. It is heartening to see that participation is a key performance indicator with focus on mature entrants, entrants with disability and entrants from non-manual, semi and unskilled socioeconomic backgrounds. An Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) is a system wide pilot which was completed by a consortium including student, higher education institutions, the HEA and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (Higher Education Authority, 2014b). This was the first report of its kind which seeks to capture an understanding of student experience nationally.

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

The HEA acknowledge Ireland's relatively poor performance in the area of lifelong learning and position this shortcoming in the context of an environment where there is a need to "enhance human capital" given that "the requirement for upgrading and changing of employee skills and competencies is becoming even greater" (Higher Education Authority, 2011: 11). It believes that higher education needs to directly interact with the up-skilling challenges

presented by the recent economic downturn and is central to helping ensure the adaptability of the Irish workforce to technological and social change (2011: 36). Only 12% of undergraduate provision was available part-time in 2007-08 which reflects the "current unresponsiveness of Irish higher education to the skills needs of adults in the population" (2011: 48).

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

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

2.9 Conceptualising lifelong learning and the part-time lifelong learning student

One of the critical unanswered issues in literature has been the disagreement on the conception of lifelong learning among scholars. Academics have long contested the basis for understanding and defining lifelong learning, and challenges associated with the conceptualisation of this concept (see Field, 2003; Longworth, 2003). Therefore, there have

been numerous ways in which the concept of lifelong learning has been understood. Doukas (2010) notes that the complexity in conceptualising lifelong learning is partly due to the nature of the concept, since it embraces varied dimensions including cultural, economic, educational and social.

Notwithstanding the disputes about conceptualising lifelong learning, some scholars suggest that one of the most common approaches to defining the term has been by categorising it into three all-encompassing categories, namely, formal, non-formal and informal (see Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; La Belle, 1981; Tuijnman & Boström, 2002). Formal learning: occurs as a result of experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support which leads to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective. Non-formal learning: is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of objectives, learning time or support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective. Informal learning: results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of objectives, learning time or support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases, it is non-intentional. Further conceptions and distinctive features of lifelong learning have also been suggested by Leong (2008, p.543), who, based on Huang (1995), suggested the features of lifelong learning should include appropriateness, continuity, flexibility, integration and openness.

Several other authors argue that the concept of lifelong learning is also connected with many other different concepts such as flexible learning, access modes, self-directed learning, open and distance learning, learning regions, learning society, and learning communities, which all signify the necessities for continued learning resulting from the prerogatives of a fast-changing world' (see Preece, 2011, p.103).

Maclachlan & Osborne (2009) suggest that the complexity in mapping lifelong learning is partly due to completeness of this concept in terms of its depth and width i.e. learning throughout the different stages of life from "cradle to grave" and across the different learning contexts including the school, in the community, in work places, at home and daily normal life (Aspin & Chapman, 2000). Undoubtedly, there are more possibilities for future studies to engage in the consideration of definitions of lifelong learning.

Several concepts and definitions of the adult student have been identified (Saar *et al.*, 2014), so much so that the majority of the literature establishes an age and an experience baseline at the outset to establish research parameters. The National Centre for Education Statistics of

the United States Department of Education describes the adult learner as "adults aged 16 or older and not enrolled in the 12th grade or below" (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2005) whereas the Irish White Paper on Adult Education (Department of Education & Science, 2000, p.27) defines adult education and adult learners more broadly as "adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training". A more recent definition provided by the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (Higher Education Authority, 2015, p.35) sheds more clarity stating that adult learners are defined as "those aged 23 years or over on 1st January of the year of entry to higher education". Wlodkowski (1999) points out that the very act of defining the word adult brings about many cultural and historical differences. However, he argues that responsibility is the one defining characteristic. The same viewpoint is espoused by Dill and Henley (1998) in their study noting that adult learners fulfil "multiple roles such as parent, worker and student". Wyatt (2011) suggests a more pragmatic approach that adult learners are based upon age (this is typically those aged 25 years and older) and who have returned to formal education having had a major break in their educational journey and have considerable life experience with a status of responsibility. This is supported by Osgood-Treston (2001) who describes adult students as above but in addition having ambitions based on well-defined and thought out needs. She further subdivides adult students into two groupings: "those who participate in organised learning activities" and "those who engage in adult learning for academic credit" (Osgood-Treston, 2001, p.3). This author is proposing to research those adult part time mature students aged 23 years of age and over and is using such a cohort to describe lifelong learning students. The term 'mature' student in Irish HE refers to all students over the age of 23 years by January of the proposed year of entry and the term Lifelong Learning in this study refers to mature students in part time HE who are engaged in formal learning across five IoT's in Ireland.

Although they may have different interpretations and imply different meanings in different contexts, this research deliberately conflates the terms part-time, flexible, lifelong learning – and now, remote – as they are regularly used interchangeably within policy documents to describe students who are not undertaking full-time programmes. Indeed, when referencing full-time provision, policy documents refer to students, whereas those undertaking part-time and flexible study are referred to interchangeably as "learners" and "students".

There is a real need for a definition of part-time and flexible students, and the various characteristics associated with this. However, the multiple and varied references to and understanding of these cohorts across even the main national policy documents (National

Plan for Equity of Access[4], Strategic Performance Framework[5]), has resulted in HEIs and the HEA interpreting these in various ways, often depending on the requirements of different funding streams. This "othering" of part-time and flexible students has an impact on how they are treated within HEIs and in the system as a whole.

Policy documents help to identify some of the variables used to characterise part-time/flexible students and which lead to their differentiation from the full-time student body:

- number of ECTS;
- number of contact hours;
- duration of course;
- mode of study;
- rationale for study;
- whether a programme was offered within normal working hours or delivered in the evenings and weekends.

Such was the range of nuances around these influencing factors, it became clear that any single definition would not fully represent the diversity of the existing cohort of part-time and flexible students. Infact, the closest definition was that such a student was "not a full-time student".

2.10 Chapter summary

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

Defining the part-time mature learner was seen to be a complex issue due to the wide diversity of studies that are available however the author identifies that the definition provided by the Higher Education Authority (2015) correlates more specifically with the aims of this research. Slowey's finding that mature learners were more likely to be found on part-time and distance

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[4] Progress Review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education.
https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/12/HEA-Progress-Review-NAP-2021.pdf

[5] Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018 – 2020.
https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/higher-education-system-performance-framework-2018-2020.pdf

learning courses being provided by further education colleges, polytechnics and community colleges compounds the need for an examination of the IoT sector specifically as it is the link between further education in community colleges and higher education in the university sector. It was expected that this research would assist in addressing the gap in the knowledge related to this sector that was evident.

It can be suggested that from both the perspective of the individual and that of the broader society and economy, the core competence that will be required in order to enable individual and communal sustainability will be the ability to learn, and adapt, continuously, and do so at a high level. In turn, research demonstrates that this competence is intrinsically linked to personal wellbeing and resilience, critical thinking, creativity and problem solving, collaboration and communication (Gaffney 2011; Reivich and Shatte 2002). These enable empowerment, leadership and entrepreneurship. Therefore, due to the need for equity, and as well as the changing socio-economic circumstances outlined, meaningful access to higher education must be enhanced to enable all to participate –not just once but on a recurring basis throughout the life cycle

Having been privileged with the opportunity to pursue higher education this author endeavours to facilitate others in their pursuit; and is hopeful that this research will improve understanding of the experience of how part-time mature students feel supported in becoming 'lifelong learners' in Irish Higher Education with a view to improving that experience and increasing participation rates and helping mature part time learners make sense of barriers and opportunities in higher education.

Chapter 3: Theorising Lifelong Learning

3.0 Introduction

The literature examined provides a summary of the current terrain of knowledge related to lifelong learning student's experience. Additionally, the literature shows adult students favour interactive and blended approaches to learning rather than the traditional didactic classroom teaching styles. Reading the literature, it was difficult to ignore the substantial impact that past educational experiences and personal circumstances play regarding mature students participating in higher education. The majority of the research identifies that negative experiences result in poor partaking in adult education. These negative experiences were identified as being secondary to poor interaction with teachers in school as well as poor familial support. Barriers to adults participating in HE will be discussed in detail. The author has employed Cross's (1981) classification of barriers: situational, institutional and dispositional as she is identified as the most seminal researcher pertaining to adult educational barriers. To critically examine the research questions, the author will examine why part-time lifelong learners return to education; the challenges and barriers faced in doing so, adult learning theory (andragogy); and other relevant educational theories and finally, the experience of lifelong learners in higher education.

3.1 Theorising Lifelong Learning and educational return

Often the motivation of the part time mature learners can be very different from that of the full time learner. Motivation is a basic recipe for student academic performance (Gbollie & Keamu, 2017). It plays a substantial role in learning as it describes student performance (Gasco *et al.*, 2014). Woodley & Wilson (2002) examine the non-work benefits associated with achieving a degree for mature students who regularly say that they are not studying for career reasons. They acknowledged a range of reasons from improved self-confidence to enhanced health that were recognised by mature learners as benefits they sought through furthering their education.

Brooks (2005) found that when questioned about the age disparity between students in higher education, many respondents thought "chronological age was less useful than work experience in explaining differences between students" (2005: 61). Added to this there was a very strong typecast which pointed to adolescent learners having less accountable and independent attitudes to learning, whereas older learners were perceived as self-motivated and strongly committed to their studies (2005: 59). This may indicate, therefore, a weakness

in the way in which we classify our students, as age is currently the only factor that determines whether or not a student falls into the category of a mature learner.

It is important to consider the decision-making process that the mature student undertakes when deciding to pursue higher education, as their deliberations are likely to provide the individual psychological context in which they interpret their experience as a mature learner since the vast majority of part-time students are mature students (Daly, 2015; Lee, 2017; Wood & Cattell, 2014), the prospect of going to HE or returning to education can be intimidating. They may suffer from self-doubt, isolation and a feeling of being an outsider (Jacoby, 2015; Lee, 2017; Mooney, 2015).   Osborne *et al.*, (2004) examined how mature students weigh up the advantages and disadvantages associated with higher education. Both negative and positive factors associated with the pursuit of further education are acknowledged and considered by the potential student. The students are categorised according to their main motivation for returning to education.

The *delayed traditional* student is one who is similar to the traditional school leaver, normally in their twenties and is similar in terms of their interests and level of commitment to the traditional school leaver. The *late starter* category includes students who have undergone a life-transforming event such as divorce and require a 'new start' in life. The *single parent* category comprises predominantly women who have a family to support financially, socially and emotionally. They face the dilemma that their engagement in further education, which is often perceived as a way to improve their family's future, in the short-term, is likely to impact negatively on their children. The *careerists* are those who are currently in employment but seek qualification to progress their existing careers. The *escapees* are those who are currently in employment but seek a way out of what they perceive to be 'dead end' jobs. Finally, the *personal growers* are those who are pursuing education purely for its own sake and who undertake further education for their own personal enjoyment or fulfilment. (Osborne *et al.*, 2004: 296). Table 4 illustrates the positive and negative factors that affect each category and we see that the factors for each of the categories are not mutually exclusive, many of the expectations, positive and negative, exist regardless of the overriding motivation for considering higher education.

Table 4. Influences (both positive and negative) on the decision to become a part-time mature student

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

Source: Osborne et al., 2004:2

It is important to consider the negative factors that potential students perceive, as they are likely to impact on how they perceive the actual experience of higher education. For example, if the potential student has foreseen a large number of negative factors associated with their further education, but experience relatively few in reality, then it is likely that they would classify their experience of further education as positive. However, if they underestimate the negative factors and overestimate the positive, they are more likely to have what they perceive to be a negative experience. This ideological stance is expressed eloquently by Knowles 1978 (cited in James, 1995) who believes that "adult learners do not bring their experience with them to higher education; they *are* their experience".

Finemann (cited in Phillips, 1986) argues that "educational institutions provided an appropriate base for redundant white collar workers seeking new opportunities" (1986: 291). While this rather crude view of the educational institute as a base for redundant workers was originally voiced in 1983, it still rings true today. As a result of the economic crash leading to significant increase in unemployment in Ireland particularly from 2007-2016, student places allocated to those on unemployment schemes such as Springboard+[6] were oversubscribed. The correlation between increasing unemployment and increasing students who undertake higher education as a reaction to redundancy or unemployment are representative of mature students more generally, but from this study it cannot be conclusively determined.

Historically, the lifelong learner may have had the opportunity of an education for education's sake, but for many lifelong learning students now there is a vocational void that needs to be filled. Traditionally education tended to be frontloaded in childhood and very early adulthood as preparation for the career that would lie ahead; one of the general principles of human capital theory (Phillips, 1986: 292). Nowadays, however, the labour market has destabilised and redundancy can force individuals who would otherwise not have engaged in education into higher education courses. The traditional route for working class teenagers of an apprenticeship followed by a steady skilled career path has been eroded and there is increased transient employment and intermittent unemployment (Marks, 1999: 158). Pilcher (1995) argues that "mature students are physical evidence of life-course destabilisation" (cited in Marks, 1999: 158) and she argues that mature students have the worst of both worlds having to deal with this destabilisation while being thrust into the role of an undergraduate, a position they believe to be reserved solely for the young.

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[6] Springboard+ provides free higher education courses for people who are unemployed or jobseekers. There is a range of part-time courses from certificate to Master's degree levels - levels 6 to 9 on the NFQ funded each year.

Thankfully, in the nearly 20 years since Pilcher expressed these views, there has been a shift in terms of how higher education is perceived and concerted efforts have and are being made to encourage wider participation; however, it would be naïve to think that this might not still be the reality for some lifelong learning learners. One would assume that if a student is studying for purely vocational reasons (i.e. to skill or retrain to achieve employment) they may be less likely to expect a positive experience if they feel they 'have to' rather than are 'choosing to' engage in education.

Biesta (2006: 169) recognised the "shift towards understanding the point and purpose of lifelong learning primarily in economic terms and far less in relation to the personal and the democratic function of lifelong learning", and suggests that this has meant many lifelong learners have had to give up control over their own agenda for learning. This resonates particularly with this author's experience of the sector during the downturn from 2008 when that many lifelong learning students returned to education to improve their employability. While Biesta argues that the shift has resulted in lifelong learning becoming a duty rather than a right, this author believes that the right did not exist for many people previously and while it may be becoming more like a duty in some circumstances, it has also provided access to education for people who previously never had that opportunity. While there is no doubt that higher education is not appropriate or indeed desirable for everybody or every career, what is desirable is universal opportunity to engage in further and higher education should the individual so decide to avail of it.

Some existing research would authenticate and almost give confidence to the trepidation that lifelong learning learners have on the subject of undertaking higher education, as there is a body of work that suggests that eyesight, balance, reaction speed and strength all deteriorate from the mid-twenties onwards, which would suggest an uphill struggle for the lifelong learning part-time learner relative to the full-time student. However, there is little evidence that any of these potential deficiencies will actually impact on the performance of lifelong learners in higher education. Berger (1998) maintains that "variation in intelligence and cognitive ability does not matter a great deal until 65 or older" (cited in Muir *et al.*, 2007: 118), thus minimising the effect that any of the previously mentioned deficiencies are likely to have on performance. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that "there is a tendency for social skills and strategic thinking to improve with age" (Collis *et al.,* 2000 cited in Muir *et al.*, 2007:118) thus providing the lifelong learner with an advantage over their full-time counterpart.

3.2 Challenges to higher education participation of part-time adult students

The question of why adults do not participate in education has been researched at some levels (Carp *et al.,*1973; Cross, 1981; Bamber and Tett, 1999; Flynn *et al.,* 2011; Saar *et al.*, 2014), however, more remains to be explored. As early as the mid-sixties, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) provided analysis on the barriers that prevent adults participating in higher education. They identified two categories that barriers fell into the internal and the external. Internal barriers tended to be dispositional in nature whilst external barriers tended to be situational in nature. Dispositional barriers are sometimes referred to in the literature as attitudinal barriers or psychosocial barriers (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982), and are those individually held values and beliefs influenced by past experiences that inhibit participation in organised education (Broek and Hake, 2012). Situational barriers are those barriers that relate to an individual's life situation at a particular time, including both the physical and social environment that they find themselves in. Cross (1981) implies that barriers associated with time, cost, geographical location, access and childcare can all be seen as situational and structural barriers. Johnstone and Rivera (1965) found within their study that gender, age, socio-economic status were critical in terms of barriers to higher education participation. These findings correlated with work undertaken by Carp, Peterson and Roelfs (1973) who, utilising a multiple-choice questionnaire identified age and gender as barriers. Whilst not classifying the barriers into categories, Carp *et al.* (1973) listed the barriers to participation in learning activities into 24 statements. In 1981, Patricia Cross griped these 24 statements and identified them as being situational, dispositional and further identified a third barrier; namely institutional barriers. She posited that institutional barriers are barriers "erected by learning institutes that exclude or discourage certain groups of learners because of such things as inconvenient schedules, full-time fees for part-time students, restrictive locations and the like" (Cross, 1981, p.98).

Adult learners must overcome a number of challenges, not all of which are restricted to their cohort but which are commonly quoted as hurdles they experience. The most noteworthy factors involved include "financial issues, relationships with partners… other external commitments, the support [or lack thereof] they received at college" (Murphy and Fleming, 2000: 82). Stevens (2003) notes that students experience anxiety, guilt and shame particularly during the early part of their studentship. However, this doubt in one's ability is common for virtually all students: "it must be a rare scholar or student who goes through his entire college course without feeling many twinges of doubt about his ability to complete it" (Cleugh, 1972: 81). Cleugh argues that it is important that lecturers dealing with lifelong learning students are aware of greater stress at the beginning of the course and therefore, should design assessments in the early stages with this in mind, so as to maximise the students' confidence

in the early stages. Morrison argues that "women are still often central to domestic arrangements and the coordination of family life; therefore, it cannot be assumed that women have 'private' time to study" (Morrison, 1996 cited in Griffiths, 2002: 269). This is an important consideration in terms of how this research could lead to an improved assessment and teaching strategy for lifelong learning students. Jordan (1997) believes that "challenges arise for adult learners as the administration, resource allocation and, most importantly, teaching are primarily focused on younger students" (cited in Kelly, 2004: 47; Layer, 2011).

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

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

Stevens (2003) explores the influence that participation in higher education can have on the self and its identities. He argues that the "self is not *given*; participants have to continually attribute to themselves particular characteristics" (2003: 237). He believes that understanding this process can help us to understand why some lifelong learning students struggle and eventually withdraw. A better understanding of the experience of students who return to education should also help to ensure that policies and support systems can be put in place to maximise the level of success and benefit of higher education for these students. Ramsay *et al.* (2007: 249) suggest that there are four main types of support that are required namely,

emotional, practical, informational and social companionship. Some of these supports are likely to come from the student's own social sphere particularly the emotional and social, but the practical and informational supports most likely need to come from their educational institution.

By generating a more positive learning experience for the lifelong learning student, an improved overall outcome could potentially be achieved. In order to make the most of the learning experience the lecturer must be aware of the difference between the way in which lifelong learning students and traditional students learn. Kelly argues that the lifelong learning learner is more "orientated towards deep learning" and that "learning which is based around the memorizing-regurgitation cycle does not appeal to them" (Kelly, 2004: 51)

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

3.3 Situational barriers

Reviewing the literature, an area of particular salience is the stress of balancing numerous demands and roles at work, at college and within their personal life. As early as 1992, Cross, conducting survey research, found that approximately 10% of participants cited lack of childcare and transport as a barrier to participating in higher education and up to 50% commented on lack of time and money. This supports research undertaken by Boeren *et al.* (2012) who show that both time and money count as major obstructions or barriers to participation in adult education. Interestingly, the authors argue that these barriers not only hinder enrolment in adult education but also have an impact on the participation experience itself with time scheduling being the most important time barrier. Family responsibilities, predominantly childcare, are important barriers too. Research by Flynn *et al.* (2011) and Reay (2003) separately demonstrate how this plays out particularly for female students thereby highlighting the gendered structural barriers (see also Scott *et al.,* 1998 and Burton *et al.,* 2011). From an Irish perspective, these findings are consistent with results published by Russell *et al.* (2002) who argue that these issues are significant barriers to women returning to education, training and the labour market.

3.4 Institutional barriers

Barriers created by institutions and organisations often exacerbate the aforementioned situational barriers. Burton *et al.* (2011, p.27) define these barriers as 'policies and procedures that, although they may have merit, may have unintentional negative facets.' MacFadgen (2008) argues that the linkage to attracting and retaining lifelong learning students depends heavily on institutional as well as personal factors, and the interaction between these. Overall, researchers agree that non-traditional students, such as lifelong learning students, believe that study at third level is associated with being 'middle-class' (Clancy, 2001), that participating at this level belongs to those in higher socio-economic groups (Brosnan, 2013) and have attitudes that 'education is for other people' (Bamber and Tett, 1999, p.468). This opinion is reinforced with certain research showing that adult learners are perceived by some college staff as being different or disadvantaged in some way (Archer and Leathwood, 2003) and other studies suggesting that there is a belief amongst university staff and some adult students that higher education is for school leavers with adults not belonging in this environment (Brosnan, 2013). This outlook is further mirrored in other studies exploring adult learners' participation in higher education which showed that institutions' individual members of staff may have little sympathy or empathy towards this cohort explicitly for learning and personal supports (Bamber and Tett, 1999). It has been argued that reasoning for these attitudes, specifically within Irish higher educational structures, are as a result of inadequate support for employees with this aspect of work not being taken seriously (Clarke, 2013). Other research suggests that it is individual institutions resistance to change that may be at fault with some higher educational institutes preferring to continue with traditional selective and elitist practices regarding student participation (Thompson, 2007). Saar *et al.* (2014) argue that educational systems which are open, accommodating and diversified, are less likely to have institutional barriers perceived in attending formal education as an adult.

The literature furthermore indicates that adult learners are somewhat discouraged by poor curriculum design, inappropriate teaching styles and institute location (Mallman and Lee, 2016). There is evidence that innovative approaches to programme delivery may facilitate greater adult access and participation to higher education. It is argued that adults favour interactive rather than didactic teaching styles (Bamber and Tett, 1999) and prefer blended learning or virtual education (Cahill, 2014). Rationale given for this preference includes the ability to continue working and meeting family responsibilities. Additionally, it allows time to process without the pressure of embarrassment removing psychological and social barriers in student – student and student – teacher interactions (Kubow, 2009). Broek and Hake (2012) argue that removing institutional barriers such as lack of time and inconvenient locations of available courses, the approach must involve flexibility of provision and distance/blended

learning. They advocate that this will result in a good and, above all, suitable learning environment; however, Cahill (2014) raises issues with this stance arguing that online education and blended learning are not the panacea to all issues regarding adult participation in higher education. Saar *et al.* (2014) also reject the idea that flexibility is the key to removing barriers; arguing that flexible, part-time study could impact on other duties, create childcare problems or issues with transport.

3.5 Dispositional barriers

Recent studies (Kaldi and Griffiths, 2013; Burton *et al.,* 2011) have shown that adult students face particular dispositional barriers in entering higher education. These include the influences of past educational experiences, academic attainment, family and personal circumstances including their socio-economic background, age and gender, in addition to job related motives. Many of the studies taking this approach draw on the work of Bourdieu (1986) who talks about dispositions being embedded within the habitus.

Reading the literature one cannot ignore the considerable impact that past experiences play regarding adults participating in higher education. A case study undertaken by Bamber and Tett (1999) has shown that adults with negative school experiences are less likely to return to higher education, a finding supported by Flynn *et al.* (2011) who attributed troubled educational history and poor performance in school with lack of engagement with learning activities at a later age. McCoy and Byrne (2011) propose that this poor interaction with higher education after leaving school is related to unfair treatment by teachers and the perception that teachers 'held low expectations for them.' Whilst McCoy and Byrne's (2011) mixed method study examined barriers faced by young school leavers accessing higher education and not adult learners, it highlights the importance of cultural perspectives in understanding educational barriers. Christie, H.; Tett, L.; Cree, V.; Hounsell, J.; McCune, V; (2008) carried out research with a group of non-traditional students in an elite university showing how being and becoming a student is an intrinsically emotional process. Cullinan *et al.* (2013) recognises this importance suggesting that their social environment also influences an individual's beliefs or expectations of the gains of higher education.

As identified in the works of Bourdieu (1973), parental environment is an important place for transferring cultural values, which significantly affect ensuing educational options. In certain situations, family, friends and partners can have negative attitudes about adults returning to education resulting in lower participation and completion rates (Brooks, 2013, Finn 2015, Thomas and Quinn, 2007). These negative attitudes include the stigma previously discussed that 'education is for other people' as well as the risk that they may isolate themselves from

their community, a concept Alford and James (2007, p.47) advocate is compounded by 'individual and institutional racism'. The influence of gender and age can also affect participation rates in higher education. Whilst the participation of young women in higher education exceeds that of young men, the participation of older women in higher education is traditionally much lower than men (National Strategy for Higher Education, 2011). There are several reasons within the literature provided for this discrepancy including issues with domestic and family responsibilities, particularly childcare. Women feel that they are left with little time or energy to study considering the availability and affordability of reliable childcare (Darmody and Fleming, 2009). This is consistent with findings within an Irish study from Russell *et al.* (2002) that highlights the importance of childcare provision for potential female students with its absence being a significant barrier to women returning to education and training. Other studies show that women are disadvantaged compared to men when it comes to participating in education, as fewer programs are available for workplaces with large numbers of women than for male-dominated workplaces (Flynn *et al.,* 2011). Boeren *et al.* (2010) argue that this may be as a result of poor support from employers. Contrastingly, results from quantitative research undertaken in North America by Kimmel and McNeese (2006) fail to support the hypotheses that adult students differ significantly by gender in their barriers to higher education. However, they do suggest that more study is required within this area.

3.6 Andragogy

Andragogy is the "art and science of helping adults to learn" (Henschke, 2011: 34). The term was first coined by Alexander Kapp in 1833 and was made most famous by adult learning theorist Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s, but much of the true development of the concept occurred during the 1920s. At that time two distinct streams within this theory of adult learning emerged, the scientific stream and the artistic stream. Post-World War One, the scientific stream led by Edward Thorndike examined whether adults were actually capable of learning. By the 1940s "adult educators had scientific evidence that adults could learn" (Knowles *et al.,* 2012: 36) due to the work of Thorndike and Sorenson, in particular. Simultaneously Eduard Lindeman who was strongly influenced by the writings of John Dewey focused on the process of adult learning and sought to understand how adults learn. He firmly believed that adult education was a process that leads to adults becoming aware of their experience and themselves and he placed self-fulfilment as a focal point around which adult learners operate. Lindeman suggested that educators should be more focussed on how adults were learning rather than what they were learning. His work was based on five key assumptions about adult learners and these assumptions form the foundations for virtually all subsequent adult learning theories.

Table 5. Summary of Lindeman's key assumptions about adult learners

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

Source: Knowles et al., 2012: 38

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

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

The experience that the mature learner has is critical as learning and personal development are affected by the emotional context in which the student is educated. "Student success is heavily dependent on aspects of social integration which involves the affective dimensions of their engagement with higher education" (Beard *et al.,* 2007: 236). While the traditional school leaver students certainly do not fall into the category of children in terms of educational theory, neither do they fit neatly into the category of adult learner because of the points raised by Arnett (2007) where he points to the fact that they are on the cusp of emerging adulthood. Typically, in the IoT sector, part time programmes will be populated by all mature learners. Lammers & Murphy (2002), cited in Hockings et al. (2007) report that while there is innovation in teaching methods in higher education the lecture is still the dominant pedagogy and while the authors acknowledge it is an efficient method of delivering knowledge to large numbers, it is ineffective in terms of exploring knowledge and experiences, which are of great importance when dealing with mature learners.

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

3.7 Relevant educational theories

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

3.7.1 Who should be educated and why?

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

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

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

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

3.7.2 Dewey

The work of John Dewey is seminal to educational theory today and although his work was primarily focused on pedagogy as opposed to andragogy there are lessons that can be applied to mature learners also. He argued that the home was where a child's curiosity is stimulated

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

Dewey argued that experience was gained through a process of simultaneous doing and suffering. The author in this research wanted to understand how participants in this research might have experienced their own versions of suffering and frustration in HE as part-time mature students. Dewey argues that the learner is acting and interacting with the world around them and intelligence is the ability to react appropriately to the environment. Knowledge and intelligence become the agents of change. By becoming adept at responding to the environment, the individual becomes capable of shaping it also. As the channel through which knowledge and intelligence are created, education therefore is the key agent for social change.

Critics argued that Dewey (1938) was advocating a kind of chaos in the classroom whereby students were encouraged to learn more about the things that interested and engaged them, rather than sticking rigidly to a defined syllabus which was working towards pre-determined outcomes. However, Dewey was not averse to the teacher being in control of the class, but he saw their role as one of guidance; in today's language a facilitator of learning. He rejected the concept of the student as a vessel that needed to be filled with information by the teacher, and this, in turn, led to his rejection of an assessment strategy that simply rewarded those who could

best remember the content of the syllabus. For Dewey, the relationship between teacher and student was symbiotic, they were learning together. Mutual respect is much more quickly fostered in an environment where the students know that their experience is valued and welcomed as part of the learning mix. The role of the facilitator is to ensure that the shared knowledge and experiences are relevant to the objectives of the class.

Dewey argues that "while all thinking results in knowledge, ultimately the value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking" (Dewey, 2004: 146). The ability to think is a true life skill, as it allows the individual to adapt to the dynamic world in which they live; knowledge itself is only useful in the right context, but the ability to think is applicable to every situation.

3.7.3 Mezirow

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

Mezirow argues that meaning that is created through learning is based on our 'meaning schemes' and our 'meaning perspectives'. The meaning schemes refer to the habitual and related expectations that we have. Based on past experience we have a cause and effect expectation, for example, we expect water to satisfy our thirst. Meaning perspectives are a combination of higher-order beliefs, theories, goal orientations or evaluations that we have. These are often based around familiar role relationships such as the teacher-pupil or priest-parishioner. There is a pre-existing structure of assumptions based on habitual expectations familiar to everyone (Mezirow, 1990). This forms the context in which we learn. For a mature learner who has not previously engaged in higher education their expectation of the lecturer may be closely related to their experience of a teacher-pupil relationship that they previously had. "Experience strengthens, extends, and refines our structures of meaning by reinforcing our expectations about how things are supposed to be" (1990: 4

The two columns in the table below summarise the ten phases of transformative learning as outlined by Kitchenham (2008) based on Mezirow's 1978 works.

Table 6. Mezirow's Ten Phases of Transformative Learning Applied to Mature Learners

Phase	Mezirow's Description of Phase
1	A disorienting dilemma
2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6	PI Planning a course of action
7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8	Provisional trying of new roles
9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

Source: Adapted from Kitchenham, A. 2008: 105

3.7.4 Alternative voices on transformative learning

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

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

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

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

The psychoanalytic view of transformative learning suggests that individuation, the process of discovering one's true self, is a fundamental part of the transformative process. "Individuation involves discovery of new talents, a sense of empowerment and confidence, a deeper understanding of one's inner self, and a greater sense of self-responsibility" (Boyd and Meyers, 1988; Cranton, 2000; Dirkx, 2000).

One of the most recent developments in the area of transformative learning is the neurobiological perspective which has been advanced by Janik (2005) who used medical imaging techniques to establish that physical changes can be identified in the brain when learning is occurring. This theory suggests that learning is most effective at higher cognitive

levels and is also influenced by gender. While these physiological aspects of learning are of interest to this research given that they focus on the individual as opposed to the social or cultural factors and given my inability to measure such changes, it was not of particular use when analysing the data in this research.

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

3.8 Chapter summary

Critically reviewing the literature provided an abundance of ideas and points of view. This allowed the author to better appreciate what studies had been undertaken in the past concerning part-time mature students, lifelong learning learners and higher education.

The review of the literature suggests that mature learners face higher levels of uncertainty around their ability to succeed, which is somewhat unusual given that they tend to perform better than their full-time counterparts do. Many mature learners are conscious of the advantages of attending higher education, but this is coupled with a range of obstacles that they face including financial problems, time management issues and apprehensions about how to attain a good work/life balance. Barriers to adults participating in HE were identified as widely researched with the majority of authors employing Cross's (1981) classification of barriers: situational, institutional and dispositional when discussing these barriers. Situational barriers such as the stress of balancing work, college and personal life were noted to be areas of specific salience. Reviewing barriers related to institutional concerns, it was noted that college staff could be less sympathetic to adult learners than their younger counterparts. Additionally, the literature shows adult learners favour interactive and blended approaches to learning than the traditional didactic classroom teaching styles. Reading the literature, it was difficult to ignore the substantial impact that past educational experiences and personal circumstances play regarding adults participating in HE. The majority of the research identifies that negative experiences resulted in poor partaking in adult education. These negative experiences were identified as being secondary to poor interaction with teachers in school as well as poor familial support. The themes that came out of the literature shape the foundation of this research which ultimately seeks to explore how part-time mature students feel supported in becoming 'lifelong learners' in Irish Higher Education.

Lindeman's key assumptions about adult learners and the andragogy theory advanced by Knowles *et al.* were applied to this research. The educational theorists Dewey and Mezirow were used to inform the authors philosophy of education and provide the basis on their understanding of what education is, and should be, for mature part time learners is based. Various transformational theorists such as Taylor, Cranton, Newman and Janik have been reviewed and the relevance of their theories to this research established. In particular, the work of Mezirow will be used to determine the extent to which the mature part-time learner experiences which will be reported in this research validate or counter the ten phases of transformative learning that he suggests occur.

Such a review helped the author in recognising the proposed research design, which will now be discussed in the following section.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.0 Chapter Introduction

This research was carried out using a mixed methods approach which is defined by Creswell and Clark (2011) as a study that consists of at least one strand of quantitative and one strand of qualitative research. Johnson *et al.* (2007) offers a more detailed definition in recognising the many and different analyses of mixed methods in existence, whether it be the different types of research or an amalgamation of the methods involved, the place in the research process in which the amalgamation happens, the extent of the mixing and the basis for using mixed methods. "Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g. use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Johnson *et al.*, 2007: 123). While the research question under exploration speaks to the human experiences of lifelong learning students and thus, at the outset would, most easily lends itself to qualitative methods, in order to try to establish an overview of the broader trends in the part-time mature learner population, quantitative methods were also used. By doing this, this thesis has the potential to achieve triangulation in empirical evidence and in doing so will overcome some of the limitations associated with a singular methods approach.

In order to investigate the experiences of part-time mature lifelong learners attending the IoT's involved in the study quantitative methods were employed using a survey. Nevertheless, qualitative methods were needed to try and ascertain the individual experiences of some of the part-time mature learners who took part in this research which were gleaned through interview. The mixed methods approach is projected to make easy triangulation of the results, with a view to increasing the validity of the findings and allowing greater potential for theory generation following data analysis. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) present the andragogy in practice model which gives a framework to this research as this is based on the approach outlined by Creswell (2009) – the pragmatic approach. The philosophical framework is principally based on the theories of Dewey and Mezirow, as the educational experience is part of an overall transformation of the individual.

This research places the learner and the learner experience at the heart of the exploration and their experiences form the foundation for this phenomenological research. Fenstermacher stresses that "consideration of the student has all but disappeared from a good deal of the contemporary discussion about education........they are simply assumed or taken for granted"

(Fenstermacher, 2006: 97). According to Dewey, real life-experience is the keystone of education which will be advantageous to both individuals and society (Dewey, 1938) thus, reiterating the significance of placing the lived experiences of part-time mature lifelong learners at the heart of this research.

This chapter now moves to an evaluation of mixed methods research and the reasons for using mixed methods are elucidated with the rationale as to why the methods and approaches to data collection were selected. The author will outline the phenomenological approach, its background and the philosophical underpinnings of the research are presented and defended and the author will introduce the reader to the concept of 'bracketing'. The author's own personal perspective of the world and research will be outlined. The setting and sample will be examined. Each of the phases of the primary research including the pilot study, the online survey and the semi-structured interviews which were conducted are then presented. The management of the interview and survey, in addition to how one analysed the data, will also be discussed. The themes and subthemes that were found within this analysis will be presented to familiarise the reader with findings prior to Chapter 5. The author also intends to show how validity, reliability and ethical principles were ensured throughout the study.

4.1 Personal perspective of the world and research

Margaret Wheatley (2010) wrote: "without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful". This author believes that research plays a fundamental role within the education field. It is at the heart of understanding, developing and expanding new and improved methods of education delivery and knowledge.

During the years of study for this research, this author questioned greatly his own paradigm or worldview. Any indecision of alliance was resolved the more he read. Exploring the positivist approach of empiricism, it became clear that this author had no allegiance to this methodology due to the fact that he believes that the world has many more facets than just what we experience through our senses. The author has come to the view that concepts such as anguish, pleasure, sorrow and many others could never be explored if one was to take a true positivist approach. His own personal perspective is that each person's worldview is uniquely interpreted exclusively within their own surroundings. This author aligns himself to the assumption that we can only know reality from our own perspective of it – an element of an '*a la carte'* relativistic approach. This interpretivist paradigm underlining how one person sees the world can only be appreciated when one considers the context in which their world is being viewed. Put simply, one needs to look through that persons lens to explore and gain an understanding of their world. This authors own paradigm being interpretivist, best fits the

purpose of this study in exploring how part-time mature learners make sense of barriers and opportunities in higher education.

4.2 Mixed methods and mixed paradigms

The design of the research must fit as tightly as possible with the research purpose. The purpose of this research was to explore how part-time mature students feel supported in becoming 'lifelong learners' in Irish higher education? Having reviewed the literature, it became apparent that this phenomenon could be understood from different perspectives. To garner an holistic picture of what is happening, combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods of research collection were selected. Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.16) define this mixed method as 'the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study.'

Utilising a mixed methods approach provided stronger evidence for a conclusion through convergence and corroboration of findings from both a quantitative and qualitative aspect. Understanding the phenomenon was benefitted and enhanced by undertaking a quantitative approach prior to completing the qualitative element. It enabled the researcher to appreciate the numerical data for the purpose of describing the phenomena and assessing the magnitude of relationships among them (Polit and Hungler, 2013). This sequential explanatory design of collecting and analysing quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data has allowed the author to gain, in breadth and depth, a clearer understanding of the phenomenon, while offsetting the weaknesses inherent to using each approach by itself. The researcher recognises that this mixed method can be time consuming and a skilled understanding of both methods was required. Having worked previously with a qualitative study, the author believes that by incorporating an additional quantitative element into his study, he will not only enhance the actual study, he will also increase his knowledge and understanding of the research process. Jogulu and Pansiri (2011) show that triangulation will strengthen the findings, and as a result, mixed methods researchers can make better extrapolations by employing multiple techniques. In turn, this whole process has acted as a learning tool.

Greene (2007) outlined six possible stances that existing literature documents in relation to mixing methods and mixing paradigms. She cautions that the list of six is not exhaustive and that each stance is not necessarily independent from one another. Firstly, the purist stance suggests that it is not possible to mix paradigms in the same study and that the interconnected philosophical assumptions that are integral to each paradigm should be respected. Secondly, the a-paradigmatic stance suggests that philosophical assumptions related to ontology,

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

This research was undertaken with the stance that both paradigms and methods can be mixed in order to ensure that the phenomenon under investigation can be reported in a manner that places the findings of the research and the possible theories that can be generated to the fore. As qualitative and quantitative methods both have positive and negative components it was envisaged that combining both allows for the positive aspects to be maximised and the negative aspect to be minimised. That is to say, for example, that the individual context of qualitative data can be enhanced by measuring the extent to which such data is replicated throughout a larger sample. This allows the data to be both broad and deep, and assists with generating theory that is based on personal but not individual experiences. By using mixed methods, this research is able to compare findings obtained through different instruments and cross check accordingly. Consequently, it is possible to match the quantitative hypothesis testing with subjective descriptions and explanations that are obtained from interviews with participants. By doing so, the researcher can "make inferences with confidence" (Jogulu and Pansiri, 2011:689).

4.3 Application of mixed methods to this research

Both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were applied to this research and while "quantitative research may be mostly used for testing theory, it can also be used for exploring an area and generating hypotheses and theory" (Blaxter *et al.,* 2002: 65), therefore, the purpose of using both methodologies was to enrich the study. While the use of a quantitative

methodology may initially seem inappropriate (juxtaposed to the hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy that pervades this research), it is believed it did in fact enhance the findings of the investigation. Mixed methods approaches are often advocated by the pragmatists who suggest that "qualitative and quantitative research should not be seen as competing and contradictory, but should instead be viewed as complementary strategies appropriate to different types of research question" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2006:15).

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

It was envisaged that the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods would increase the validity of the research. The focus however has always been clear; the qualitative data from the interview phase will be paramount. The sequence of implementation of the research was however the reverse; as the online survey was initially sent to gather the quantitative data and also identify willing participants for the subsequent interview phase. While this research does not, and could not, make meta-inferences about part-time lifelong learners, theory generation was undertaken and suggestions as to how the experience of part-time mature learners in Irish IoTs could be improved have been advanced.

Two typologies of reasons for mixing methods are outlined by Creswell and Clark (2011: 62) based on the work of Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989) and Bryman (2006) and the reasons for using mixed methods vary from triangulation to improved credibility and utility. The application of mixed methods in this research provided triangulation by gathering data through

more than one method, and it also improved the credibility of the individual learner experiences that were reported. Finally, the mixed methods approach improved utility (Bryman, 2006) by making the findings more useful to this author as a practitioner and it is hoped for other practitioners and policy makers in the sector.

4.3.1 Specific research questions and research methodology

Given the distinctive nature of quantitative questions and qualitative questions, it is more challenging to frame a research question in a mixed methods study than that in a single method study. Through the review of the literature regarding mature students/part-time mature students in higher education, the author has found a real dearth of the lifelong learner perspective in the research. Therefore, one goal of this study is to account for how part time mature lifelong learners experience being a student in higher education. Another goal of this study is to determine how mature part-time students feel enabled/constrained by the general HE policy context and the particular culture of their institution and how higher education institutions help attend to and potentially reduce the differently located challenges/barriers and better support part time students? Moreover, the literature on barriers to participation for this cohort in higher education predominantly references Cross's (1981) survey research, which is now nearly forty years old. Thus, the last goal of this study is to give an updated account of the barriers this cohort face so that we have a greater understanding of the kinds of issues mature part-time HE students face with a view to better supporting the future for part-time lifelong learners,

To address the gaps in the literature and achieve these goals, this study seeks to answer the following research questions using the following methods and analysis.

Research Question	Method	Analysis
What is the experience of being a lifelong learning student in higher education?	Literature review Survey – getting descriptive statistics to get a sense of the cohort Interviews	Literature review: comparing and assimilating previous research findings on the experiences of mature students in higher education. Questionnaire survey (based on literature review findings) Interviews – analysis of interviews using IPA.

How do mature part-time students feel enabled/constrained by the general HE policy context and the particular culture of their institution?	Literature review Survey Interviews	Literature review: comparing and assimilating previous research findings on the experiences of mature students in higher education. Questionnaire survey (based on literature review findings) Interviews – analysis of interviews using IPA.
How can higher education institutions help attend to and potentially reduce the differently located challenges/barriers and better support part time students?	Literature review Survey Interviews	Literature review: comparing and assimilating previous research findings on the experiences of mature students in higher education. Questionnaire survey (based on literature review findings) Interviews – analysis of interviews using IPA.
What kinds of issues do the experiences of mature part-time HE students, and the changing policy context, present for the future of part-time "lifelong learner"?	Literature review Interviews	Literature review: comparing and assimilating previous research findings on the experiences of mature students in higher education. Questionnaire survey (based on literature review findings) Interviews – analysis of interviews using IPA.

Table 7. Specific research questions, methods and analysis

This study used a questionnaire to gather data to give the researcher information on part-time students. The questionnaire offered the opportunity to look for statistically significant trends and differences. Then the qualitative method of data, which followed, was critical as this enabled the students to express their views in their own words.

4.4 The theoretical framework

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

4.5 The phenomenological researcher

An ethnographic style was considered but was disregarded at an early stage due to the fact that it is concerned solely with description and lacks theoretical basis (Cirgin Ellett and Beausang, 2001). Ethnography, the oldest qualitative approach, is concerned in giving a detailed description of what is studied rather than determining why the people being studied act the way they do. A grounded theory approach was also contemplated to examine adult learners' perceived barriers to participating in higher education. A key concept of grounded theory is its strength in allowing researchers to start afresh and not be influenced by the present knowledge, thereby opening up the possibility of new perspectives on old problems (Parahoo, 2014). The purpose of grounded theory is to generate hypotheses and theories. The purpose of this study is to explore perceived barriers rather than create a hypothesis or theory, therefore a grounded theory approach was also disregarded.

Having explored these methodological approaches, phenomenology was deemed the most appropriate process to answer the proposed question. Both phenomenology and grounded theory share a number of characteristics. They both focus on the richness of human experience, seek to understand a situation from the subjects own frame of reference, and use flexible data collection procedures. Nonetheless, they are based on different intellectual assumptions and, flowing from these, have clear differences in purpose and methodological prescriptions (Baker *et al.,* 1992). The greatest value for undertaking a phenomenological approach to the study lies in the fact that it is the only approach available which deliberately takes a participant's subjective perceptions as its focus. Hallet (1995) argues that these are the perceptions which have the most value and are most worth studying.

While J.H. Lambert coined the term phenomenology, it is more often associated with Husserl and Heidegger, each of whom advocated their own type of phenomenology. Flood (2010:17)

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

Heidegger understood the importance of teaching and learning and perhaps most appealing to the researcher; he understood the difficulty of teaching, not a greater need for knowledge on a subject matter, but facilitating the student in their learning, to let them learn. "The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than – learning" (Heidegger, 1968:15).

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

Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen as the methodology through which the lived experience of the participants would be considered. This branch of phenomenology places emphasis on the interpretative nature of the process by which we create meaning in our lives. The subjectivity of the interpreter is acknowledged and it does not seek

to assume that there is one final interpretation which is correct. Unlike the physical world there is no single truth when exploring social phenomena.

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

There are two aims associated with IPA. Firstly, the researcher must try to understand the participant's world and describe it and secondly, they then develop a more overt interpretation related to the wider social, cultural and theoretical context (Larkin, 2006). These aims have been embedded in this thesis by including a separate findings section (Chapter 5) which represents the reported world and/or experience of that world by the participants and a discussion section (Chapter 6) which seeks to use interpretative analysis to position the initial findings in the wider context. Yet even the findings section is subject to some interpretation, as it is virtually impossible to describe something without adding an interpretation at the same time (Pringle *et al.,* 2011; Finlay, 2011). Therefore, minimal interpretation is included to avoid simply subjecting the reader to a list of quotations. In addition, IPA is "idiographic in its commitment to analyse each case in a corpus in detail" (Smith, 2011), therefore the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim manually to ensure thorough analysis on a case by case basis.

The pivotal move in Husserl's philosophy is what he refers to as phenomenological reduction, a procedure associated with the metaphor of 'bracketing' (Paley, 1997). 'Bracketing' as described by Husserl is where all judgements about the external world must be suspended. This description challenges recent definitions of 'bracketing' given by various researchers. Baker *et al.* (1992) states that 'preconceptions should be identified and put aside' which is correlated by Jasper (1994) who claims that 'bracketing' involves the 'deliberate examination of the researchers own beliefs about the phenomenon and the temporary suspension of these'. This confusion is further confounded by Cohen and Omery (1994) who suggest that 'reduction is the process of looking at the experience naively, without the preconditions, the prejudices, and the biases that one usually brings to any description.' The author wished to apply the concept of 'bracketing' to the study to reduce bias and preconceptions and therefore, enhance

trustworthiness. Considering all approaches to reductionism, it seemed desirable to examine one's beliefs and temporarily suspend these. Some may argue that it is not legitimate to label this technique as 'bracketing', but it is believed by the author that by recognising this, credibility will be maintained.

4.6 Selection of IoT's

Given the scope of this research it wouldn't have been practical to explore all IoT's in Ireland, therefore the decision had to be made as to which institutes would be approached and asked to take part. A variant of snowball sampling was used to select the institutes. The researcher wanted to get a flavour of the whole country so Cork IT represents the South, IT Carlow the South-East and Mid-East, IT Blanchardstown represents Dublin, Athlone represents the Midlands and Dundalk represents the North-East of Ireland. Furthermore, all of these institutions are operating in broadly similar territories.

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

4.7 Stages of inquiry

The primary research was conducted during three separate stages which followed on from the initial secondary research and resulting literature review. These are as follows:

Stage one: A pilot study was first conducted to test the intended methods of inquiry that would be applied to phases two and three (i.e. the Ph.D study), and to provide the opportunity to identify any errors, omission or improvements that could be applied.

Stage two: An online survey was sent to all lifelong learning students (*n=7,493*) in the five participating colleges. This online survey was used to gather data from a large population which would allow for some discussion as to the general trends among part-time mature lifelong learners. Furthermore, the online survey was the vehicle used to identify willing participants for the third phase of the research.

Stage three: Semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 lifelong learning students who volunteered to take part in this phase via the online questionnaire.

The availability of online survey software means that once a survey has been designed online it is as easy to analyse responses from large numbers of respondents as it is to do so for smaller numbers. Thus, by using a larger number, validity can be increased without any significant additional resources being employed. As this online survey was being sent using student lists from management information systems databases, there was no additional work involved in sending the link to a large number. However, this type of scale would be totally unsuitable when using the interview phase which followed.

4.8 Data validity

The question of assessing the validity of qualitative research has also to be considered. In essence this is about certifying that the information gathered throughout the research process is the information subsequently used in the authors findings and analysis. Simply put, research is valid when it measures what it sets out to measure (Parahoo, 2014). Here, the concern relates to the researchers' decisions about what data to gather and interpretation of this data. Overall, to boost the validity of the research, and instruments used, the researcher assumed the following methods. Collecting data through one method can be questionable, biased and weak (Robson, 2011). Therefore, in order to strengthen the validity of the study, data was collected through two methods as mentioned rather than one technique. Member checks were instigated. This involved interviewees reviewing the content of their individual interview. In this way the plausibility and truthfulness of the information was recognised and supported (Zohrabi, 2013). It is obvious and apparent that every researcher has their own particular values, beliefs and worldviews. As a researcher, it is pivotal that all data collected, analysed and interpreted is done so in an impartial way. The researcher was explicit, critical and faithful at all phases of the inquiry process to increase the validity of the study. To enhance vigour, all ethical rules and principles were adhered to, evaluation was performed as accurately as possible and honest reports delivered.

4.9 Reliability

One of the main requirements of any research process is the reliability of the data and results. In the main, reliability deals with the consistency, dependability and replicability of the results obtained from a piece of research. To ascertain reliability, the author adhered to the following methods. As for validity, the inclusion of a second research method permits the collecting of varied types of information through different sources, thus enhancing reliability (Zohrabi, 2013). Additionally, to increase reliability of the research, the researcher ensured that explicit

explanation was provided outlining the different processes and phases of the project. To facilitate this, the researcher elaborated on every aspect of the project. Rationale, design and participants were described in detail. Reliability was further strengthened by assuming pilot studies (discussed below) and undertaking an audit trial. This audit trial incorporated detailing how themes were derived from the analysed data. This detailed and discursive approach contributes to its reliability.

4.10 Stage One – pilot research

The pilot research was conducted using four small groups, each of five part-time learners across a wide range of disciplines (Science/ Engineering / Social Science / Law / Education and Digital Media) at Institute of Technology Carlow in May 2017. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for this pilot research. The main focus of the quantitative research was on the broad experience of the part-time lifelong learning students and the qualitative research purposefully looked at the actual experience of certain willing participants. This was to ascertain if stage two and three were potentially fit for purpose.

The administration staff in the Faculty for Lifelong Learning organised for 20 students who consented to be involved in the pilot phase.

The findings of the pilot research revealed the need for further study to demonstrate the outcomes of the experience of part-time mature lifelong learning students. The choice of sample group links with what Caswell maintains that 'the research chooses participants who can contribute to the development of the theory ... the rationale for studying this heterogeneous sample is to confirm or disconfirm the conditions, both contextual and intervening, under which the model holds' (2007: 128).

Steps within the research process and interview were developed and refined following the pilot research (Lichtman, 2013). Significant changes were made to the layout of questions following the pilot interviews. The feedback from each group was that there were too many questions in both the survey and interviews and that they needed to be more focused. This was really useful feedback and was consistently relayed by each group. The author proceeded with the same format for each of the pilot groups and then used this feedback to make the relevant changes so as to strengthen the subsequent survey and interview process.

In particular, a number of changes had to be made to the online questionnaire. The number of questions was reduced from 33 to 14 and this aided the interview process greatly. Feedback indicated that the pilot questionnaire was too long and would take too long to complete. In

addition, the number of questions piloted for the interviews was too long and seemed to lose focus. In the light of this feedback, some of the questions were restructured because they were deemed to be leading and might colour the interviewees' responses. In refining the questions, more open questions were created which guided both the advice from supervisor and colleagues and by the writings of Ribbins who stated that "open questions are at the core of qualitative interviewing and have many possible answers (cited in Briggs and Coleman, 2002: 215).

The author also gained valuable insights through the pilot study such as needing to hone skills in probing questions in situations where the discussion moved away from the intended topic of conversation and thus needed to be rephrased into a question. Though these questions were not listed in the original questions script, they helped answer the research questions without losing the developing discussion. The location of the interviews is also very important and this too was learned from the pilot study. The pilot study was carried out in a classroom setting and this did not help to break the ice with the participants so the author learned that it would be more beneficial to change the interview setting from the classroom to a more social setting.

The pilot study also greatly enhanced the authors understanding of how best to prepare the questions for the interviews. The revised questions post pilot study provided a basic outline of questions to be asked within the semi-structured format of the main study.

After collecting the data from the pilot study, the author was reassured that IPA was best suited to this study as it "invite(d) participants to offer a rich, detailed, first person account of their experiences" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 56). IPA is concerned with the texture and depth of individual experience (Wedlock, 2016), and consequently necessitates participants to yield rich narratives. The primary goal of IPA researchers is to investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences. There is no rule regarding how many participants should be included. IPA studies have been published with, for example one, four, nine, 12 and 15 participants. Larger sample sizes are possible but less common "in general, IPA researchers should concentrate more on the depth, rather than breadth of the study" (Pietkiewicz, I. & Smith, J.A. 2012).

4.11 Stage Two – Online survey using Survey Monkey

This author took the decision to use an online questionnaire, as it is the most effective way to target the group of lifelong learners in the participating colleges. Arguably some learners were perhaps less likely to engage with an online survey than a survey conducted in person or through the post but the latitude of this research would not permit those methods. Moreover,

the online survey was deemed to be more desirable as it would facilitate access to a larger number of learners than could otherwise have been achieved. Survey Monkey was used and this allowed for the use of a designed fit-for-purpose template. The advantage of using an online survey is the ease of access to participants in distant locations (Wright, 2005), also it was not time sensitive, so part-time students could access the survey in their own time. Another advantage of this method is to question diversity, there is quick and easy access to a range of question types from dichotomous, to multiple-choice and open ended, all of which could be presented in an easy to understand fashion. Also, it is believed that people are less inhibited and more honest when completing online surveys provided they are assured of confidentially and anonymity. The automated data collection allowed for greater ease of gathering the data and minimised the amount of time required for collection, thus increasing the amount of available time for analysis and presentation of findings.

Table 8. Number of part-time mature students

College	Number of part-time mature learners
DKIT	612
CIT	2,510
ITC	2,564
ITB	700
AIT	1,119
TOTAL	7,493

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

to the disadvantages and difficulties that would have been associated with a postal or personal survey.

The use of quantitative data is closely associated with the positivist perspective of trying to apply natural science research methods to the social science field. However, this mixed methods research exhibits reflexivity rather than positivism throughout. In addition, the questionnaire was structured after a significant amount of literature had been read in relation to the topic under investigation. Despite this acknowledgement of the contamination, this author does not believe that the research is hindered in any significant way by this reflexivity.

Having made the decision to use an online survey authoring package, attention then turned to the content and structure of the questionnaire. Given the difficulty of encouraging potential respondents to participate in the survey, a very conscious effort was made to limit the number of questions and to try and have them as fit for purpose as they could possibly be. It was designed to ensure that it was long enough to provide a meaningful amount of data, but short enough to ensure students would respond. The final question asked respondents to leave their name and contact details if they were willing to take part in a follow-up interview.

The questionnaire had a short introduction before question one outlining the purpose of the research and an assurance that any information gathered from the survey would be held in the strictest confidence. After the last question, respondents were thanked for their participation. The layout was very simple. The wording of the questionnaire was designed with the intention of avoiding any questions that would be irritating or confusing to the participants. Also, every effort was made to try to ensure that the questions were not leading in any way. The questions only sought information that the respondents were likely to have i.e. their personal status and opinions (Denscombe: 2003). Having learned from the pilot stage, the language used was unambiguous and no jargon was used; all questions included were deemed to be vital for the research and were as short and straight forward as possible.

4.12 Response rates

There were 563 responses recorded on the online software package. In theory, all registered lifelong learning students were contacted across the five colleges and invited to take part in this survey; that is to say that if a student was registered as a part-time lifelong learning student with their college then they were on the mailing list for the survey link. However, there were a number of reasons why the lifelong learner may not have participated despite the invitation being extended. Firstly, they may simply have chosen not to participate for various personal reasons ranging from lack of available time to apathy. Secondly, they may not have received

the invitation e-mail and link to the online questionnaire if their college mailbox was full and thirdly, technological issues such as a bad connection to the internet or an inactive link may have prevented their participation or they may not be using their college e-mail at all.

Determining an acceptable response rate was difficult and somewhat futile as the students invited to participate could not be compelled to do so. A number of steps were taken to try to ensure that the response rate was maximised. The purpose of the survey was very clearly outlined in the e-mail that was sent to the target population; assurances of anonymity and confidentiality were included. Nulty (2008: 302) outlines the importance of assuring students that their "responses will be de-identified" and will be used in aggregate after results have been issued when trying to illicit responses in the educational setting. Sufficient time was given and access to the online survey was allowed for the summer months of 2017.

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

Clear instructions and simple language was used to construct the questionnaire and where possible closed dichotomous or multi-chotomous questions were used. No compensation was offered for participation in this research but this is not likely to have had a major effect on the response rate. Göritz examined the impact of material incentives on response quantity and quality and found that various types and amount of material rewards used in online panel surveys "have no or only mild effects on response quantity and no effect on response quality" (Göritz, 2004: 337).

The 563 responses represent a high response quality which is as important as the response rate. Response quality is based on the number of items omitted, the completeness of answer, the response time and speed and respondent satisfaction (Wright & Schwager, 2008: 258). The final question in this survey asked respondents to provide contact details if they would be happy to participate in a follow-up interview; 34.8% of respondents ($n=162$) left their details which would indicate a significant level of respondent satisfaction. The number of total responses represents a response rate of 13.3% which was deemed acceptable as the main purpose of this research is to gain insight into learner experience rather than to make generalisations about the population which makes high response rates less important.

4.13 Semi-structured interviews

When the willing participants were gathered from the online survey, they were then organised using Excel, based on the date of response or e-mail addresses provided. However, this was not an exact science as students had not been asked to identify their institute and some gave contact details other than their student e-mail address. This was undertaken to impede stratified random sampling. Once stratified, an online random number generator was used to identify a participant. After this, each participant was then contacted to verify that they were agreeable to take part in the next stage and arrangements were made for the interviews. All selected were contacted but three were rejected on the basis that a reasonably even spread of female and male participants was necessary to try to allow for any gender differences that might distort the findings.

Twelve interviews were conducted from October 2017 to December 2017. As first proposed by Reid *et al.* (2005), less is more in IPA: fewer participants examined at a greater depth is always better than a wide-ranging, surface and simply descriptive examination of many individuals, as commonly seen in thematic analysis and grounded theory or poor IPA. Smith *et al.* (2009) highlight that as a rough guide, between three and six participants should be considered for an undergraduate or Master's thesis and up to 10 for a Ph.D. This author chose 12. Eleven of the 12 were conducted in person and the other one was carried out over the telephone. The candidates were given the option of choosing which method they would prefer as well as the time and location and unsurprisingly, the majority agreed to meet in person. An interview schedule was used for all interviews. All of the interviews were recorded, with the written consent of the participants and were then transcribed word for word and re-read for accuracy.

Considering the extensive amount of information collected by the Survey Monkey questionnaire, it was imperative that the interviews did not simply function to reiterate the students' previous responses but rather complemented the questionnaire data by providing

more clarification and understanding regarding their given answers and personal experiences in relation to their experience of being a part-time lifelong learning student.

After transcribing each interview, a copy of the transcription was sent to each participant by email and they were asked to verify the accuracy of the interview. Eleven of the 12 participants responded and two asked for minor amendments of words used. Other than that all were happy that the transcribed interviews were accurate and fair.

4.14.1 Quantitative data
Survey Monkey was used to gather the quantitative data. The results of this are shown in appendix 1.

4.14 Data analysis and interpretation
This section presents the methods uses to validate and evaluate the data. Jacelon and O'Dell (2005) sum up the method of data collection and analysis by putting it side by side with a Celtic knot pattern where the line of the pattern continually turns back on itself. This analogy was particularly valuable in reiterating the need for this researcher to continually re-examine and revisit the data in order to steer the process.

In preparing the interview questions prior to carrying out the interviews, advice was sought from colleagues working in adult education as suggested by Bell (2005: 118). In light of this consultation, some of the questions were restructured because they were deemed to be leading and might colour the interviewees' responses. By refining the questions, more open questions were created which were guided by the writings of Ribbins who stated that "open questions are at the core of qualitative interviewing and have many possible answers" (cited in Briggs and Coleman, 2002: 215).
 When drafting the interview questions, five suggestions posed by Tisdell and Taylor (2007:7) were considered relating to adult education which sought to probe the core values, thinking, beliefs, experiences and expectations of the 65 individuals to be interviewed. Key issues considered in formulating the questions were:

What is the experience of part-time mature lifelong learning students?
What challenges do they encounter?
What opportunities does it bring?
How do colleges support them?
How does the state support them?

4.14.2 Qualitative data

Computer software, such as NVivo®, was considered as an approach to qualitative data analysis due to the proposed easy retrieval of category information whilst reducing the time required in performing tedious manual tasks (Beck, 2003). Other proponents of these technical methods suggest that software packages also enable researchers to handle large amounts of data, enhance the flexibility and comprehensiveness of data handling, thus permitting more rigorous data analysis, and allowing for a more visible audit trail for data analysis. Whilst the author recognises these advantages, he considered them inappropriate for this study due to the principle of a phenomenological approach, which demands that the researcher 'dwell within the data' (Hallet, 1995, p. 57). Incorporating a software package may have resulted in the author distancing himself from the data, which could result in loss of meaning and context. As with all research projects, timeframe was also a concern. The unfamiliarity concerning software packages could have resulted in wasting precious time rather than actually saving it. The author incorporated the Colaizzi (1978) data analysis framework (Appendix 4) to analyse the data retrieved from the interview. Following the transcription of the interviews, the author immersed himself in the data in order to comprehend its meaning in its entirety as recommended by this framework.

Each interview transcript was read and re-read. Utilising a thematic analytic approach, significant statements were collected under different headings. This qualitative analytic method as identified by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) helps facilitate the:

 'Identifying, analysing and reporting of patterns (themes) within the data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic.'

From these significant statements formulated meanings were developed. These formulated meanings were aggregated into cluster themes. All related interview sections were classed under the same heading, thus supporting the retrieval of data whilst also strengthening the validity and reliability. During the reading and re-reading of the transcripts, the interviews which were audio-recorded were again listened to so that consideration could be given to the manner in which replies were given to certain questions. This is considered an essential part to the analysis, as the rich language displayed by the interviewee will facilitate further insight into the research issue. These cluster themes were further arranged into emergent themes through coding where patterns were identified. These emergent themes were used to present a rotund portrayal of part-time mature lifelong learning students' attitudes and perceptions of their experiences in higher education.
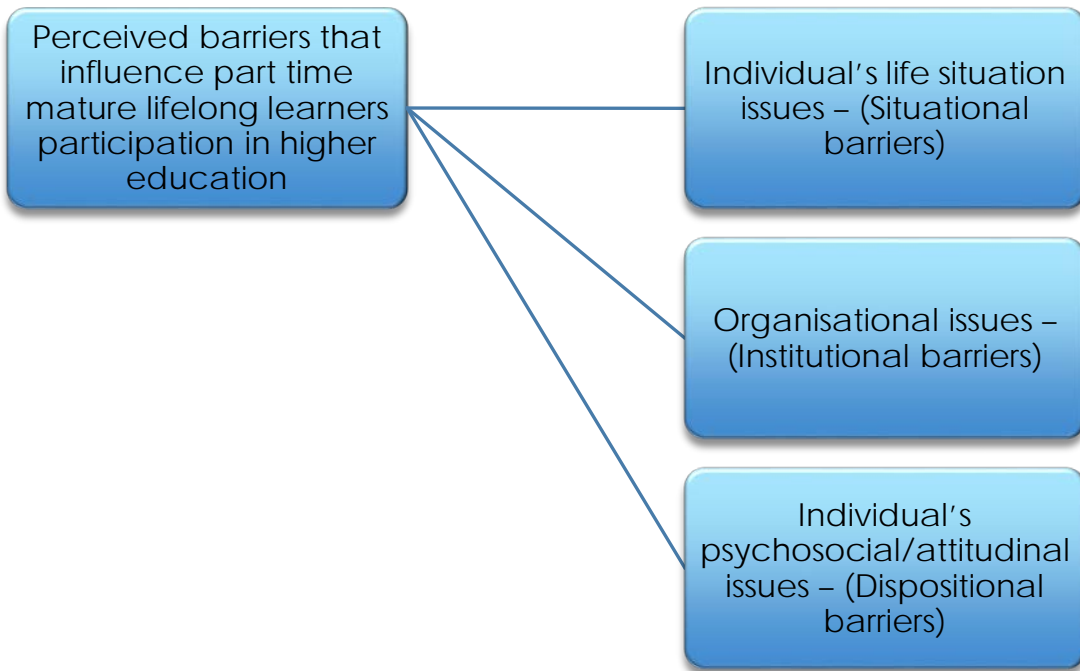
Figure 2. Themes that emerged from the study
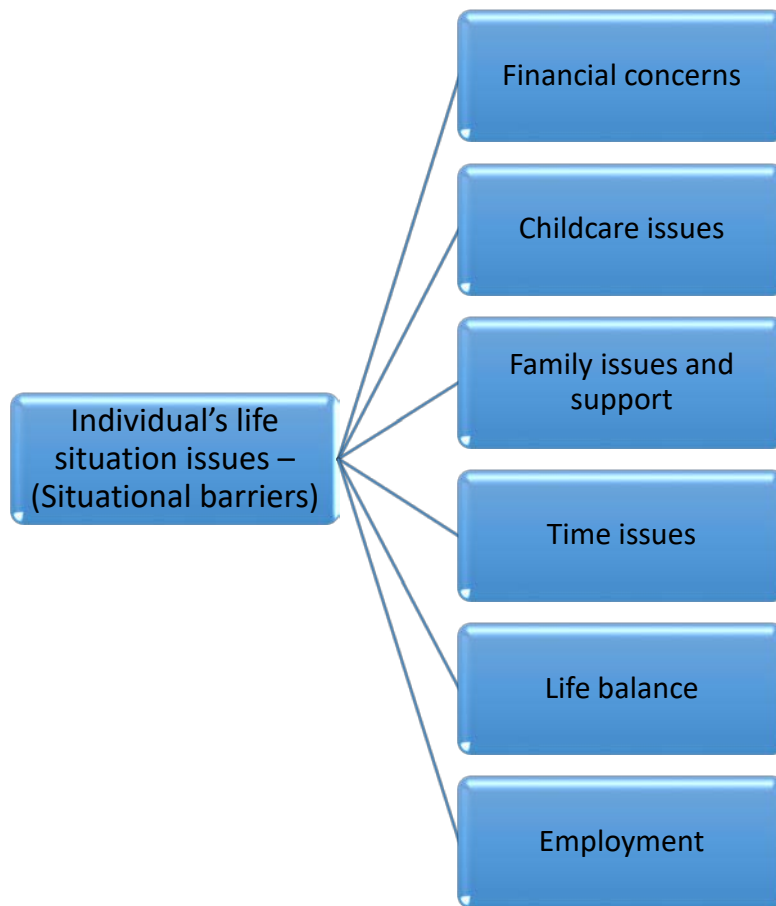
Figure 3. Subthemes related to an individual's life situation (Situational barriers)
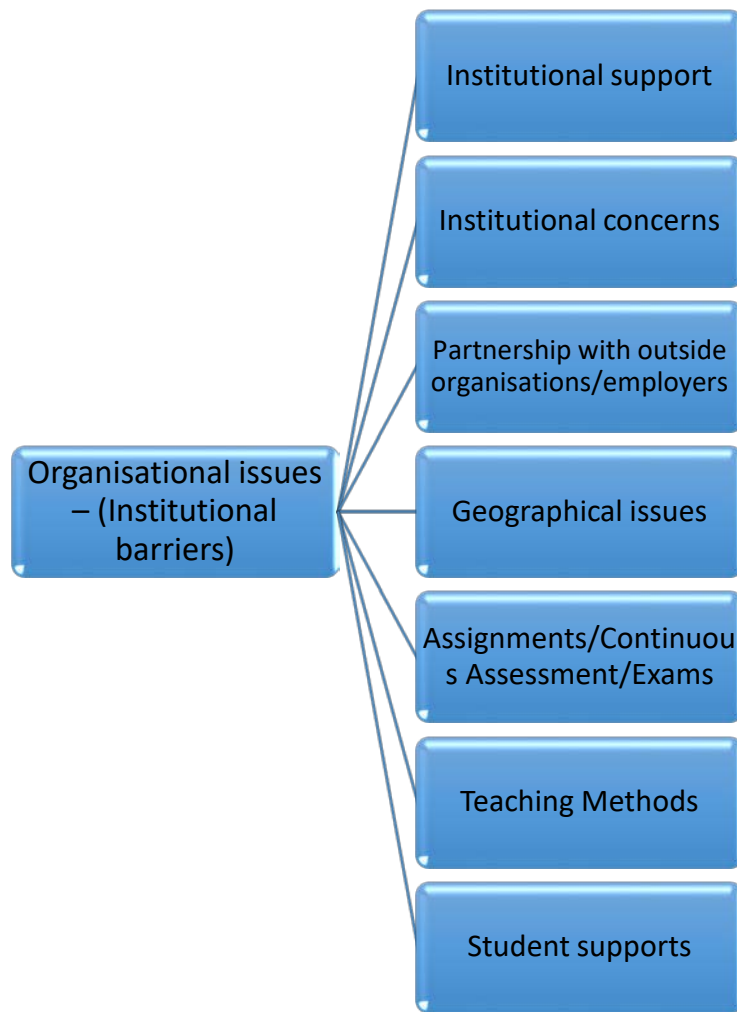
Figure 4. Subthemes related to organisational issues (Institutional barriers)
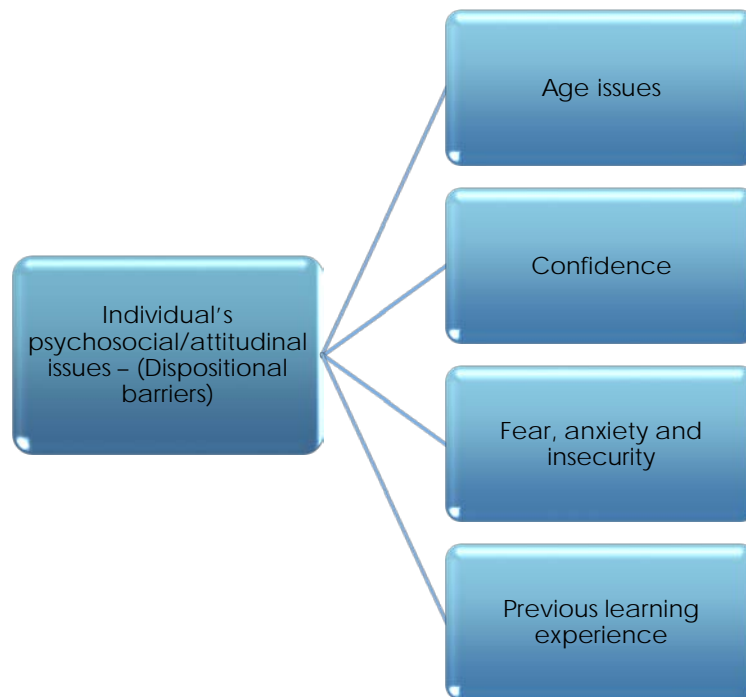
Figure 5. Subthemes related to an individual's psychosocial/attitudinal issues (Dispositional barriers)

4.15 Ethical issues

Ethical implications were considered at every stage of the research process. Permission to undertake the research was obtained from the appropriate ethics committee and whilst research was considered to have little or no risk, participants were advised that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any stage. In addition, all IoT's were assured that the data would not be used to compare their performances or indeed make conclusions about the experiences in a specific IoT.

Beneficence – Welfare

The principles of beneficence, autonomy and justice were adhered to throughout the research process. The author was aware that potential issues surrounding the experiences of part-time lifelong learning students in higher education may be emotionally upsetting for some of the interviewees. A crucial part of the interviews was an awareness of sensitivity regarding the topic with the interviewees. If, during any of the interviews, the participants became emotional or upset, the interview would have been suspended immediately. After the interviews were finished, the interviewees were given the chance to voice any issues that may have arisen during the interview. This allowed the interviewees to express any concerns that may have

arisen from discussing their experiences of issues related to being a part-time lifelong learning student in HE.

Autonomy - Consent

Before each interview, informed consent was received from all interviewees. This was done to confirm that the interviewees fully understood the potential risks and benefits of being involved in the study (Parahoo, 2014). To facilitate these principles of autonomy, an information sheet was given to the interviewees. The information sheet with the informed consent gave a brief summary of the aim of the study and details of how the study was to be undertaken. All interviewees were given sufficient information so as to be fully informed of the nature and purpose of the research and all had the opportunity to withdraw at any stage.

Justice - Confidentiality

Polit and Hungler (2013) reference that all interviewees should be treated with respect and fairness throughout the research process and have their privacy respected. Every effort was made to ensure that this happened. The anonymity of all interviewees was preserved at all times. The names of the interviewees were protected and no information was reported in a way that might identify anyone. In addition, all the transcribed material was stored safely and securely.

The ethical principles above were used to guide the research in addition to addressing any concerns that arose during the research process. Following these principles, the author was able to meet the goals of study whilst upholding the rights of the research participants at all times.

4.16 Qualitative data coding and analysis

The human story and the human experience is best seen not by numbers but by words and so the majority of the research focused on the qualitative – on the semi-structured interviews. These semi-structured interviews were then analysed in excel. The themes that were established from that, in alphabetical order, are as follows:

- Assignments and continuous assessments
- Employment
- Experience
- Fears or concerns

- Finance
- Geographical issues
- Finance
- Geographical issues
- Learner supports
- Lecturers
- Life balance
- Other students
- Reasons for study
- Teaching methods

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

4.17 Chapter summary

Consideration of the appropriate methodology for this research hinged primarily on one objective: to report the lived experience of mature learners honestly and fairly. The philosophical underpinnings draw on the work of Mezirow. The andragogy model advanced by Knowles helps to position the research in terms of how education of the individual is affected by the individual and situational differences and also how their education can result in individual, institutional and societal growth.

A mixed methods approach was used for a number of reasons. Firstly, the survey was designed to test a broad population to try to determine what the key issues facing the population of mature learners in the participating institutes are, and whether or not the mode of delivery affected those issues. Secondly, the interview phase was designed to garner a deeper understanding of the lived experience of mature learners. The use of mixed methods provided triangulation also, which it is hoped increased the validity and rigor of the research. In addition, the author ensured that the participants were happy with the representation of their experiences and the critical friend was used to safeguard that no bias was applied to the data either unintentionally or deliberately. Every effort was made to ensure that the research process was undertaken in an ethical and fair manner which allowed for a true representation of mature learner experiences to be gathered and analysed. The findings from the research can be found in the following chapter 5 where minimal interpretation has been applied, and they are evaluated and discussed further in chapter 6.

Chapter 5 Presentation of Findings

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of part-time mature lifelong learning students in HE, in particular, how part-time mature lifelong learners make sense of barriers and opportunities in HE. This chapter outlines the findings from the questionnaire, discusses the focus group and presents profiles of the participants, each of which contributes to providing an overall picture of the experience of lifelong learning students and introduces in a personal context many of the ideas discussed by theme in chapter 6. This chapter is a precursor to the discussion chapter to familiarise the reader with the findings of the study.

The focus of this presentation of data is to present it in its raw form as it was collected. In doing this, the author is remaining true to the interpretative phenomenological approach which asserts that the researcher must attempt to comprehend and describe the lived experience of the individual and only then explicitly include their interpretation of the data in a wider context. Whilst the results of the process are now presented, the findings are discussed in detail in the next chapter which seeks to situate these findings in the existing body of knowledge and theoretical framework to create new knowledge where, as determined by the IPA method, the explicit analysis happens.

5.1 Facilitation of part-time mature students by the participating institutes

Some of the institutes that are participating in this research seem to be making a concerted effort to reach part-time, mature, lifelong learners and to facilitate their learning in a flexible and supportive environment. Institute of Technology Carlow in its Strategic Plan to 2018 states, "as acknowledged national leaders in the provision of Lifelong Learning programmes, our strategy will stimulate and inspire greater participation and inclusivity in higher education by all members of our community" (Institute of Technology Carlow Strategic Plan 2014-2018: 27). In 2014/15, the most recent year for comparative information is available for the Technological Sector, Institute of technology Carlow had the highest % whole time equivalent (WTE) of lifelong learners in the technological sector at 27.6%. This was significantly above the average for the sector which was 12.1%.

Athlone Institute of Technology in its Strategic Plan 2014-2018 sets out that, "over the duration of the plan, the total student population will grow by 15% from a 2013/2014 baseline of 5,300 to exceed 6,000 learners. The taught postgraduate population is envisaged to grow by 40% from a baseline of some 320 to in excess of 430 by the end of 2018. The lifelong learner

population will increase by 15% over this period" (Athlone Institute of Technology Strategic Plan 2014-2018: 26). They list a key strategic goal to, "further develop lifelong learning, work-based learning, structured work placements in curricula and develop effective models that facilitate greater staff engagement with business/industry and the wider community in line with the mission of a TU" (Athlone Institute of Technology Strategic Plan 2014-2018: 4).

Cork IT (CIT) state, "National targets in relation to the participation of under-represented groups in higher education will be achieved or surpassed and CIT will increase its adult lifelong learner and CPD student enrolments by 50%" (Cork Institute of Technology Strategic Plan 2012-2016: 11).

Dundalk IT with its Strategic Objective 1 *to increase the level and range of flexible and lifelong learning provision*, "DkIT will prioritise its strategic focus on increasing its participation and access rates. This requires a prioritised focus on increasing flexible and lifelong learning provision" (Dundalk IT Strategic Plan 2017-2019: 23).

IT Blanchardstown which is part of the TU4 Dublin Alliance (which consists of DIT, IT Tallaght and IT Blanchardstown) states, "The capacity of the Institute will increase in the coming years, driven by demographic trends in our region, together with growth from non-traditional areas. The need for lifelong learning and up-skilling among the workforce will also contribute to growth…………….TU4Dublin will be a leader in lifelong learning and executive education opportunities" (IT Blanchardstown Strategic Plan 2016-2019: 6).

5.2 Findings

Results from analysing the data are presented based on exploring the individual findings. In a sequential explanatory design, this will begin with quantitative results, and then follow up with the qualitative method as a way of explaining how and why those results look the way they do. It can be summarised as QUANT --> qual.

This section focuses on the results from the quantitative analyses of students' responses to questions from the questionnaire and is then followed by the results of qualitative analyses of students' responses from the semi-structured interviews.

5.2.1 Online survey summary

The purpose of the quantitative method using questionnaire was to get an overall picture of the part-time mature lifelong learning student population across the five colleges and ascertain what matters arose. The questionnaire via Survey Monkey was sent via email to all the part-

time mature learners across the chosen five IoT's. The email was sent to 7,493 learners of which 563 engaged fully and responded. The questionnaire produced the following results:

Gender:
The majority of the participants who completed the survey were female at 62%. According to the HEA Facts and Figures 2016/17, 29% of part-time undergraduate students were female whilst 57% of postgraduate part-time students were female (Department of Education & Skills, 2018). This indicates that the response was higher amongst females in this study. Interestingly, the HEA figures do not give a breakdown of the gender across the IoT vs. University sector.

Age:
Just under 7% of the respondents were over the age of 60 with a total of 36% over the age of 45. This backs up the findings of Fleming and Murphy (1997) and Watson *et al.* (2006). Most mature part-time lifelong learning students are under the age of 45.

Dependants:
Almost two thirds of participants (64.1%) involved in the survey had one to four children.

Travelling distance to college:
Given that the literature speaks about a lot of barriers to education it was interesting to note that 63.3% of learners travelled greater than 20 kilometres to their chosen college. A further 169 learners (30%) travelled distances greater than 41 kilometres to attend college.

Employment status:
Most learners (72.9%, n=410) were in employment with 52.8% in full-time employment and 20.1% in part-time employment. This would seem higher than in the recession years and aligns strongly the return of a stronger economy.

Financial support:
(61.1%, n=355) received no financial support, grant or bursary to complete their chosen course. This too is higher than one would have seen in the recession years.

Highest level of education:
When asked about their highest level of education in accordance with the NFQ, the majority (80.6%, n=454) were educated to apprenticeship level and higher with (21%, n=118) having previously attained degree and Masters/Ph.D qualification. This contrasts significantly with their parents' highest level of education, which can be seen below where 27.9% were educated to

apprenticeship level and higher with (n=157). It could be argued that parents'/guardians' highest level of educational attainment is less relevant when discussing lifelong learning students. However, this questionnaire was part of the initial exploratory research and was done to get an overview of the entire part-time mature lifelong learning student populations and to see what issues arose.

Discipline of study:

As can be seen from the following chart, learners were enrolled on programmes of study across a broad range of disciplines. This was positive as it indicated that the respondents represented a broad church of experience.

Table 9: All respondents question 12

What discipline area are you studying?

- Business, Administration and Law — 131 — 23.2%
- Services — 20 — 3.6%
- Engineering/Manufacturing & Construction — 74 — 13.1%
- Arts & Humanities — 82 — 14.6%
- Social Sciences/Journalism — 104 — 18.5%
- Education — 45 — 8.0%
- Health & Welfare — 77 — 13.7%
- ICT/Computing — 23 — 4.1%
- Agriculture/Forestry/Fisheries/Veterinary — 0 — 0.0%
- Other — 7 — 1.2%

TOTAL **563**

Areas of concern:

Given that the literature addresses many of the barriers and challenges faced by mature students, it wasn't surprising to note that 92.5% strongly agreed/agreed that time pressure was an area of issue and 86.5% strongly agreed/agreed that financial pressures were an area of issue. Looking across the responses to the strongly agreed/agreed on this question, 82% were

concerned about their ability to succeed, 64.8% had concerns regarding childcare issues whilst personal relationships at 38% and integration with other students at 20.4% indicated lesser areas of concern.

Question 14 asked

To what extent if any are the following issues of concern to you as a part-time student?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Integration with other learners	**8%**	13%	51%	11%	17%	100%
Childcare Issues	47%	18%	4%	13%	18%	100%
Personal Relationships	23%	15%	36%	15%	11%	100%
Time Pressure	55%	38%	5%	2%	0%	100%
Financial Issues	**65%**	22%	2%	9%	2%	100%
Ability to Succeed	47%	35%	2%	10%	6%	100%

Table 10. Question 14

Conclusion:

The questionnaire administered via Survey Monkey was very useful in giving a broad overview of the part-time lifelong learning student body across five IoT's and the issues affecting them. The author cross tabulated the quantitative data to ascertain significant statistical differences. The stories of individual students that unfolded in the pilot study and the 12 interviews afford a more personal account of the experience of being a part-time lifelong learning student in HE.

5.2.2 Pilot study findings

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the author conducted a pilot study at Institute of Technology Carlow. This was part of the preliminary broad investigation of the area 'to see what came up.' Twenty students participated in four focus groups that targeted lifelong learning students across all disciplines at Institute of Technology Carlow. The following table summarises the participants by gender:

Group	Male	Female	Total
1	2	3	5
2	2	3	5
3	1	4	5
4	2	3	5
Total 4	7	13	20

Table 11. Number of students in pilot study

The author started by explaining the nature of the research and advising the students that he was hoping to hear about their experiences as lifelong learning students. The pilot study was extremely invaluable in that it brought to light many issues. Firstly, the proposed survey was too long and the participants questioned the need for 33 questions. Indeed, once the author re-examined the proposed questions after the pilot study and realigned them to the research questions it was possible to reduce the questions down to 14. Questions such as nationality, marital status, specific educational qualifications of individual parents/guardians, occupations of parents/guardians, occupations of siblings, year of study, specific reason for studying discipline area and college of study whilst all very interesting in and of themselves were deemed to be surplus to requirements and not in line with the research questions. The same was true of the interview questions that were used in the 12 interviews. Again, the pilot study was invaluable in focusing the author on realigning the questions to the research questions and certainly enabled the author to glean more value from the interviews. The idea of 'education as transformative' was prominent in the pilot study and a long held desire to revisit formal education as well as the vocational motivation, however ambiguous and embryonic in some cases. Certainly all the participants in the pilot study were incredibly positive and despite challenges and barriers felt they had enjoyed being in higher education and had changed/transformed as a result. This was articulated principally in terms of words like confidence, self-image and 'seeing things clearly and differently.' This seemed to be a broad feeling not attached to any explicit new skill or capability.

Time management and finance were issues for all but especially for those with family and children and there was agreement that part-time lifelong learning students need to be more focused as they are time-poor. The format for the pilot study did not allow for an in-depth exploration of topics as the author was conscious of not asking about examining too deeply or asking too personal questions in this context. The students who participated said they were happy of the opportunity to discuss these issues and found the exercise beneficial – the author

was very conscious to keep the group focused on not seeing it as an opportunity to give specific feedback to their Head of Faculty and was clear at the beginning of his role as researcher in this instance.

5.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

The majority of the participants involved in the interview were female (7 females and 5 male). The ages ranged from 26-66 years. Twelve learners were interviewed. Eleven were conducted face to face and one was conducted over the telephone. All were rerecorded with the consent of the learners/participants. Each interview was transcribed and sent by email to the learner who then verified that they were happy with the transcription or, where appropriate, requested that a change be made for accuracy. Excerpts from the interviews will be provided as examples in the following discussion and presentation of data. A coding tool is used to protect participant's identity and to maintain confidentiality. Each learner has been given a unique identifier LRN A through to LRN L.

The following table gives a brief summary of the twelve learners who were interviewed

Table 12. Number of part-time mature students

LEARNER	BRIEF BACKGROUND	COURSE OF STUDY
LRN 1	43yr **Female** Originally from UK Employed full-time Highest level of education – Degree	Level 8 Bachelor of Arts Honours in Early Years Education
LRN 2	29yr **Male** Employed full-time No previous HE – Leaving Certificate	Level 8 Design student
LRN 3	39yr **Female** Employed part-time Highest level of education – FETAC L6	Level 7 Bachelor of Arts in Applied Early Childhood Education & Care
LRN 4	36yr **Male** Employed full-time Highest level of education – Level 6 HE	Level 8 Bachelor of Engineering Honours in Mechanical Engineering
LRN 5	47yr **Male** Employed part-time Highest level of education – Honours degree	Master of Business Studies
LRN 6	47yr **Male** from Southern Africa In direct provision	BA in Addiction Studies & Community Development

LRN 7	41yr **Female** Works full-time Highest level of education – Honours degree	Honours Bachelor of Laws, Legum Baccalaureus (LLB)
LRN 8	26yr **Female** Works full time Highest level of education – L6 FE	BA in Applied Social Studies
LRN 9	54yr **Female** Works full time Highest Level of education – Leaving Certificate	Higher Diploma Digital Media Design
LRN 10	50yr **Female** Works full time Highest Level of education – Leaving Certificate	BSc. Supply Chain Management
LRN 11	66yr **Female** Retired Highest Level of education – Level 6 Certificates	Certificate in Web Design
LRN 12	44yr Male Works full time Highest Level of education – Honours degree	Higher Diploma in ICT Skills

5.3 Barriers and challenges faced by part-time mature learners

Innumerable barriers to HE that face mature learners are well documented in the existing literature though it mainly refers to barriers for full-time mature students rather than part-time mature students. While it could be argued that external barriers are not in fact the only or main reason why mature learners do not participate in higher education, for the purpose of this research, barriers to higher education are interpreted as factors that make accessing education more difficult for part-time mature lifelong learners. The interview sought to verify that the reported barriers exist for this cohort and to identify any new barriers that may not have previously been reported.

5.4 Situational barriers

- *Financial concerns*

Attending higher education as an adult is full of issues concerning an individual's life situation. A primary concern for participants was financial issues. The majority of participants recognised the financial concerns with attending higher education on a part-time basis and the lack of any support for this. This was reiterated in several of the interviews. One student explains:

'From my own personal point of view, I suppose the cost of everything was one of the biggest issues that kinda kept me back a bit...I got a loan out of the credit union and I'll just have to pay them back…it's a lot of money to take onto yourself.'

(LRN 2)

Another student interviewed expressed concerns that attending higher education can have on financial issues that can impact on other aspects of life.

'The financial aspect of coming here is a big thing…myself and my husband are five years into a mortgage and we've a little girl at home who's only two so we have childcare expenses as well…it's a big risk to take…'

<div align="right">(LRN 1)</div>

- *Childcare Issues*

A common thread found within the findings of the interview was the issue surrounding childcare. In some of interviews where some learners argued that without the support of family and partners, attending college would be impossible.

'My routine at the start was to do a little bit of study from time to time with the children so they could see me studying and that it would have a positive effect on the children to see Mammy studying, it didn't work, the children hated me on the laptop so my routine completely changed, so I try to keep my family life to family life, they know I go to college on a Tuesday, Thursday and some Saturdays and if I have any additional study to do I only do it when they are in bed, the night time is now my time, it took up to Halloween to get this routine".
You need to get support around the kids…I was lucky, my partner was there quite a lot and then my family as well would call around to mind the kids. If I didn't have that I don't know would I be here.'

<div align="right">(LRN 3)</div>

Another student identified that when she was younger, college was not an option due to issues concerning childcare.

'I would have found it tough when the kids were small. It wouldn't have been the right time. I would have worried about the kids staying at home I was able to put their needs first. Now it is my time'.

<div align="right">(LRN 10)</div>

Participants who did not have children also recognised the issues concerning childcare with one student explaining:

'Also, looking and listening to others I'm lucky I don't have children to get them organised. I can't imagine how I could cope with being in college and having kids to organise.'

<div align="right">(LRN 2)</div>

- *Family issues and support*

When asked about family and friends, interviewees were resolutely unanimous of how supportive and encouraging they were.

'My family are absolutely brilliant. I couldn't do it without them. It's not even that…it's just that they believe in me which is such a nice feeling to have"
(LRN 1)

"My family have been a great support and encourager" (LRN 2)

"I was lucky, my partner was there quite a lot and then my family as well would call around to mind the kids. If I didn't have that I don't know would I be here.' My family have made this possible" (LRN 3)

"My family have been a great support" (LRN 4)

"Also my family have been a great help" (LRN 5)

"The best support students get is from their families" (LRN 6)

"My family have been very supportive and positive" (LRN 7)

"I want to do this for my family who have been wonderfully helpful to me" (LRN 8)

One student, almost tearfully, explained that without her family support the possibility of completing the course would not have been possible:

'My family are absolutely brilliant…I couldn't have do it without them…it's not even that…it's just that they believe in me which is such a nice feeling to have. When I thought of giving in they have encouraged me to keep going.'
(LRN 11)

Whilst students acknowledged the support they get from home they also recognise that responsibilities from home life can impact on their education.

'When I go home you know you have a husband there and kids and all the distractions and you can't get anything done…a house still needs to be ran.'
(LRN 8)

'It's not so much an issue coming to college…the problem is trying to get work done at home…it's doing assignments as well and you need like to sit down and get them done and you know some weekends just to get sorted. They seem to think because you're at home you don't need to be doing work.' (LRN 11)

- *Life Balance*

Finding the balance between college life and life outside was presenting a challenge for some interviewees and the reasons why the balance was difficult varied from one student to the next. LRN 3 was juggling being a part-time student with a part-time job and caring for her child with ADHD which was not only time consuming but also exhausting. When asked if she ever felt like she was missing out by not being there enough for her son, she was clear that he was the priority and everything else had to be arranged around him.

"When you have children having to juggle so many things is massive. Just to keep up with the work. You'd have a lot of work to do in the evenings and sometimes I'd be at it the whole weekend like whenever I'd get the kids to bed I'd be sitting up for hours and you'd be so tired going to work then." (LRN 3)

"Sometimes I work late into nights with assignments and get to bed for maybe two or three hours. Then in the morning I am so tired and I just don't want to get out of bed, but I have to. The kids have to be gotten up, washed and get ready for school. I have to work. I have to do well at college, I have to clean the house, I have to ….oh my head just spins at times. It is really difficult juggling life and part-time study and home." (LRN 1)

"There are so many assignments and projects. You're doing a project and you're trying to work like… it's very hard to concentrate on that and work as well… plus the fact that I'm commuting… you're not inclined to look at anyway… I feel tired a lot of the time anyway."

(LRN 12)

LRN 11 felt that she was lucky that her family were at a stage in life where they were reasonably independent and able to manage their own affairs.

"This is my time. My kids are grown up so I know I wouldn't have been able to do this if they were younger. I marvel at how other people seem to manage with young kids and a job. I'd never have managed it.

(LRN 11)

This was also echoed by LRN 10

"Being part-time. If I was a full time student I still would love it just as much but I am too old, because if I was here full-time and with the younger students I would end up mothering them they are the same ages of my children. I would have found it tough when the kids were small. It wouldn't have been the right time. I would have worried about the kids staying at home I was able to put their needs first. Now it is my time".

(LRN 10)

But there are other aspects of LRN 11's life that have had to be put on hold. *"Being in college means I had to put bridge on hold for this year"* (LRN 11). Similar to LRN 11, LRN 2 did not have the difficulty of juggling a family with college life but he still had to make a conscious effort to ensure that there was a balance in his life.

'Tis hard being in full time work, I work seven days a week and I get a day and a half off every two weeks, there are three classes a week so to get time to try and get assignments in is difficult, time management has a massive impact. I have nine hours of classes a week and I work nine to five every day. It is playing havoc on my social life. There's no… out socialising in the evenings in the pub… there's no… I have to go and get the jobs at home done in my spare time… there's jobs, chores around the house, everything is put on the long finger and it's totally down then onto studying and that's it'.

(LRN 2)

- *Time Issues*

Another concern that was identified within the findings was the issue of time. The vast majority of respondents within the interviews expressed issues with not having enough time to attend college and complete coursework.

'Time constraints are a big issue…you're working full-time and trying to find time to get assignments done and keep the housework done and the house going…sometimes it does get too much.'

(LRN 8)

'The worst part was time, lack of it and the constant pressure. Continuous assessment, exams, and assignments – it is tough going'

(LRN 5)

Time concerns are also an issue for students who have work placements within their courses.

'It's the time you need to get your placements in…you need 270 hours which is a lot especially for me 'cos I'm working full-time in my own job – time planning is a big thing for me.' (LRN 1)

- *Employment*

The majority of the students were balancing study, family life with work commitments but all had individual hopes around employment on completion of their courses.

'Studying part-time is challenging because you are constantly juggling work life balance.'

(LRN 7)

'I hope to pass it, after that I really don't know, I might take a little time out and see what happens but I would hope to get a good job from my qualification.' (LRN 7)

'I feel like a juggler ……………life, home, family, work, there is so much to do. That is the reality of part-time study I suppose' (LRN 2)

'Employment after graduating' (LRN 2)

'The hardest part would be as an adult you have life going on' (LRN 6)

'I want to get myself into a position where I will be able to work within the social department and consequently at one of the refugee centres or should I say the socially excluded community where drug addiction is an issue I would like to be working with the social excluded and counsel them'. (LRN 6)

'It is such a broad course I actual don't know, sometimes I think I may like to work for MSD or do something with the building construction industry in the mechanical part of it, but really I don't know where I am going to end up because it is such a broad course' (LRN 4)

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

'In an ideal world I would like to get seriously involved in the transport infrastructure within Ireland, the transport sector does not get a fair deal but the present Minister for Transport does not encourage me to go that direction, I don't know what I am going to do with it, I really don't but I would like to use the qualification for the betterment of all' (LRN 10)

'''It's been a really positive experience and hopefully worthwhile as regards getting into the IT area. What the media says it's not as easy getting a job even in IT as they make out but I feel that when I graduate I'll be in a great position with my qualification.' (LRN 12)

LRN 5 also found himself with skills that were not required in the current market.

'I also saw that I needed to upskill as I was a bit rusty and in the current market I felt if I didn't I would be left behind. I decided to be re-educated so as to bolster my employment for now and the future'.   (LRN 5)

LRN 11 was an exception as she felt that employment wasn't on her radar. She had chosen to take a place on this course because it was of interest to her at this time in her life.

'I'm not here to get a job out of college, I'm here as I can be at this stage and simply want to learn for learning sake.'   *(*LRN 11)

5.4 Organisational issues – institutional barriers

Within the following section the author will outline the findings that are related to institutional barriers. These barriers are created by institutes that exclude or discourage certain groups of learners because of such things as inconvenient timetables, information technology support, restrictive locations and the like.

- *Institutional support*

Findings from the interviews show that it was obvious that students had a number of opinions concerning the support that their college provided. The majority of students believed that the college had provided them with support. This was particularly evident in the interviews:

'*Yes, I don't have any problems, I know a few of the lads do have problems from time to time, but I have never have any issues*'   (LRN 4)

'Yes definitely, I am one of the student reps for the class so I communicate frequently back and forward between the college and my class. I have never felt that I couldn't phone the college or couldn't approach anybody in the office to have a chat with them, any requests that we have brought to the table over the last year have been put in place or have been acknowledged, even if something has not been done and it is not possible to be done it has been acknowledged and is being worked towards it, the communication process is very good'   (LRN 8)

'*Yes we do get very good support from the college, we don't get any support from the state*'   (LRN 9)

'*I had a clear understanding of what was required from the college…and if you weren't sure you would ask the question like in terms of like individual lecturers or someone at the front desk…it's nice to have someone at the desk that you know…*'   (LRN 11)

Others pointed to improvements and suggestions for the future in terms of supports needed:

'I do think it would have been beneficial for our very first class that rather than starting on the first module we had a class on essay writing and finding e sources in the library. We had a session with the librarian a couple of weeks ago and it was really informative and now we can use the library but we are a third of the way through our course and it is only now we know how to use these resources, whereas up to now we were trying to find our references through Google which was very difficult, I know a couple of my class mates found the essay writing particular difficult where we had to write in the third person whereas when we are writing in level 5 and level 6 you're writing from our own perspective so that has been a difficulty for a lot of my peers and myself. You are supported by the colleges there is only so much you can do because it is down to the students to actual do the work and to manage our time' (LRN 1)

'I hear some of the students within the Lifelong Learners within our group expressing they are not, they are a little out of their depth but as a group we support each other' (LRN 3)

'I guess the colleges are trying all they can, it can be improved, it is a challenge to try and fit in the responsibilities of being a returning or an adult learner, if the colleges could dedicate a full weekend into bringing the students on board by taking them out of the environment of where they are away from their everyday engagements and look at the syllabus that is being taught and make time to discuss how the students are working and what they have learned or discuss what they will be looking at' (LRN 6)

'Now that I think of it, part-time students are poorly supported in terms of access and student services support' (LRN 5)

'When I came in first and I am a certain age I hadn't done an essay for 20 to 30 years the level that is expected is very high and my first essay was appalling, I know there is a course but I do believe for the part- timers there should be a little bit more than that' (LRN 10)

- *Institutional support*

Whilst the majority of comments concerning the colleges were in a favourable light there were concerns that were highlighted by the students in the study. Several concerns related to the timetabling of classes and specifically exams. One student who was interviewed reported:

'There was a lot of confusion around what days we needed to be in and the college changed them around…that was a bit confusing and annoying…like how hard is it to organise?'
(LRN 5)

Another student supports this statement arguing that:

'The exam timetable comes out way too late…there's no clarity at all…I don't think the college recognises that something so simple has a massive effect on part time students' (LRN 8)

Another concern that became apparent in the interviews related to academic writing. All participants expressed an opinion that there was not enough time spent on this part of the course especially when it is such an important aspect of higher education. Two students interviewed offered the following suggestions:

'*A fear was the academic writing...the college should provide a lecture concerning academic writing…it would have helped with my fears.*'   (LRN 1)

'*Maybe more could be done around part time supports for students like me with dyslexia*'
(LRN 2)

'*…the academic writing knocked me for six…it was a big leap from level 6…all the college had to do was give a session on what they expected with academic writing and how to go about it…that would solve a lot of people's problems*'

(LRN 8)

- *Partnerships with outside organisations/employers*

A number of students involved in the study received sponsorship and/or financial assistance from another organisation/skillnet/employer/springboard to attend college. Therefore, the author felt it appropriate to enquire as to how organisations supporting students facilitate or hinder students participating in higher education. Not surprisingly, there was commendation of these organisations by students:

'*My employer has been brilliant and has given me some leeway as well when I'm under pressure with assignments and examinations*'   (LRN 10)

'*The Skillnet funding has made a big difference to me and they have been a great support and even helped out with the cost of books*'   (LRN 1)

'*My county childcare committee had a pot of funding for training and they encouraged me and their assistance is a huge benefit and aid to me*'   (LRN 3)

'*I know there is some funding available and that the criteria differs around them, myself I was very fortunate to receive funding for the course, before I started the course and started my own business I was in receipt of Social Welfare my name was on a list for funding, I was lucky enough that my name was picked out from the list to receive funding from EGS for my first year which was great, one year was an awful help, then the department of Educational Skills contacted me at the start of my final year because it was a two year course they were going to link up with the EGS and fund the rest of the course, I was very fortunate to be in a position to have both years funded*'   (LRN 8)

'*I am 100% funded through Springboard – this is a massive opportunity and one I am glad to avail of. This is my ticket to a better future*'   (LRN 12)

- *Geographical Issues*

Locality of higher educational institutes plays a considerable part in students attending college. This is recognised by students within the study. Whilst the majority of students did not have an issue with location of the institute:

'*Travel was never a concern for me…I live locally so it was perfect for me.*'   (LRN 12)
'*I live so near to the college…it great for someone like me living so near*"   (LRN 11)
"*It is fantastic to be able to get the degree done in Athlone which is so close*"   (LRN 1)

Some students found distance to be an issue:

'The distance I had to travel for this course is a pain…I couldn't find a college near me that did this course…I drive quite a distance which is one thing I had to put a lot of thought into it.'

(LRN 9)

- *Assessments*

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

"Group work can be frustrating and projects can be patronising when designed to simulate the 'real world' and not everyone in a group pulls their weight – but I guess that is life." (LRN 3)

"Being required to take part in group projects not ideal what with work and family and being part-time student. It is very hard to organise at a practical level". (LRN 12)

"I hate exams. Why do we have to do them?" (LRN 9)

"Sometimes it seems that lecturers don't communicate as we get several assignments and assignments at the same time. It needs a better scheduling." (LRN 7)

- *Examinations*

The learner's sentiments relating to assessments varied quite significantly. For LRN 2 the thought of exams was fraught with nerves; however, the actual experience of taking the exam was not as bad as expected.

'However it isn't as bad as I thought. Maybe the adrenaline kicks in but then when you come to the time you know, you put the pen to paper, you know, you're able to write a good bit and the information just flows'. (LRN 2)

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

'It is good if you have the application to sit down and stay on top of it through the year that is the best way to go about it, through your assignments you have 40% out of the way before you go into do your exams, which is good, it is a fair system say for people that have never been to third level or there is a significant gap from the last time they studied' (LRN 7)

'I find it is grand, but then remember I have life skills, I have lived, I have run a company, and I deal with the Minister for transport the academic end didn't frighten me I actually found that in exams I did quite well and I like having the opportunity to show my knowledge.' (LRN 10)

LRN 5 found that the time constraints associated with assessments were most stressful. He preferred submitting continuous assessments and felt he performed best in those assessments, but timed practical exams were his greatest challenge.

'The worst part is time, lack of it and the constant pressure. Continuous assessment, exams, and assignments – it is tough going. I can get quite stressed and up in a heap particularly over final exams. Even though it is all stressful, I prefer continuous assessment over exams'
(LRN 5)

5.5 Individual psychosocial/attitudinal issues – dispositional barriers

Within this the author will outline the findings relating to dispositional barriers. These barriers are individually held values and beliefs influenced by past experiences that inhibit participation in organised education.

- *Age issues*

The majority of part-time students did not see age as an issue:

'I don't feel too old 'cos I knew there were more mature students and energy wise I'd be fine as well.'
(LRN 9)

'I'm not really concerned about my age…I'm just a bit worried whether I'll be able to go the distance.'
(LRN 11)

- *Confidence*

Confidence did not seem to be an issue for respondents within the interviews with the minority believing that they lacked the self-confidence to undertake a course.

'I needed to be able to prove to myself that I had the ability to learn, that I could retain information, that I could grow as a person even though I was 48 returning to college that was my main motivation, if it hadn't of worked out at least I would have tried I didn't want to go forward and look back and go I could have done that or this, at least if I had tried I can say well I tried and it didn't work out, and now that I am here I am going this is great I actual feel like this is my second home because when I am here I don't feel like I am in college. I have more confidence as a result of being in college'
(LRN 9)

The majority of students had no issue with being ambitious and were confident that they had chosen the correct course. The findings from the interviews bear this out:

'I feel very comfortable I feel my self-confidence has come up greatly, I would be a quiet person, I have made a lot of friends and my confidence is growing socially and in speaking and in writing.'
(LRN 9)

'In my programme specifically I started with a learning to learn module which brought me to a level which kicked out all the fear, it showed be it was not as difficult as I thought, I am not going to be murdered, it is not going to make me go crazy, it has been addressed well.'

(LRN 6)

Students also expressed the view that achieving aims within the course increases their self-confidence:

"In the beginning I didn't believe in myself…I started getting the grades and then it started to really build my confidence…I started enjoying it!" (LRN 1)

- *Fear, anxiety and insecurity*

Fear of failure was the principal concern identified by the participants in the survey with over three quarters of respondents identifying it as a concern. Of these students, a quarter believed it to be an overwhelming concern. This finding was also evident within the interviews with one student expressing:

'My biggest fear is failure, failure as simple as that…there is a lot riding on me passing this course…money, family job security so fear of failing is right up there.' (LRN 1)

'Sometimes I panic and I realise I'm afraid of failing. I want to achieve this for me, for my kids and family.' (LRN 3)

Students when probed during the interview explained that these fears are exacerbated by fear of the unknown and feelings that they won't be able to do everything.

'It is very daunting initially like there's so much to do and I just feel I won't be able to get it all done' (LRN 3)

- *Previous experiences*

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

'I have done my level 5 and level 6 and I have an honours degree in management, done through UCD, I would consider myself a Lifelong learner' *(LRN 1)*

'I didn't have the same interest in learning back then, when I was 19. I was a full time Architectural Technology student, I only went as far as level 6, every evening at 5 o clock I couldn't wait to get out of the college. I played a lot of sport but not for the college, I didn't want to be in third level at that time now I am completely changed. *(LRN 4)*

'I have years of life experience, so I had something to compare to in my mind… you know if you do a course that you have some knowledge and experience on it's not all totally new' (LRN 11)

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

'Life experience is invaluable…' (LRN 11)

'Compared to my undergraduate years, I felt you know I was more mature now, I would study more and gain more from the course. I'd be more focussed' *(LRN 4)*

- *Personal relationships*

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

'Yes – the biggest difficulty I found in making the decision was, was it going to have a knock on effect on family life, I chatted with my husband and asked my two kids how they felt. We have one child who has ADHD. When you have children having to juggle so many things is massive' (LRN 3)
'It's much harder now no matter where you work or who you're married to, when you have a child it's ten times harder, and sometimes I feel I am not there for my child' (LRN 4)
'Being away from home so much with college' (LRN 5)

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

*'*You are always juggling' (LRN 5)
"It is really difficult juggling life and part-time study and home' (LRN 1)
'I have had great experience, negative only would be it's hard regarding time to juggle life, work and study, but that is what you get with being a mature student' (LRN 4)

'Juggling be difficult at times, but I suppose I am in a good position that I am self-employed I can dictate my own hours, sometimes I work really late or through the weekends, but I find it okay' (LRN 9)

'When it comes to juggling you become militant literally, for I do Monday office, I finish at 3 o clock, then its family commitments and then I head to the IT, Tuesday I do all the banking and administration connected to the business and Tuesday afternoon is for college work and I would do an awful lot of college work on Sundays' (LRN 10)

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

'My partner and I were considering having kids but I couldn't start a family at this stage whilst in college' (LRN 2)

- *Wellbeing and lifestyle*

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

'Personal issues outside college' (LRN 2)
'Health and mobility issues' (LRN 11)
'I had some concern about the stress levels I would be putting myself under, as I am not the most confident of people, but I have been pleasantly surprised at how well I have coped'
(LRN 7)
'Because I am a mature student and work very hard, I was afraid of burn out'
(LRN 12)

- *Awareness of self*

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

'You can't have it all your own way all the time. I'm quite in touch with my need to be in control….' (LRN 11)

'I have realise that I am hard on myself and expect a lot from myself' (LRN 7)

- *Quality of the education provision and experience*

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

- *Reasons for studying*

Various reasons for returning to education as part time mature students were expressed by the interviewees. Some reported that this was something that they had always wanted to do and somehow the opportunity had presented itself.

'It was mainly for work purposes, I have done my level 5 and level 6 and I have an honours degree in management, done through UCD, I would consider myself a Lifelong learner. For progression in my career it is important for me to keep training'
(LRN 1)

'I did transmission year and fifth year and then left school, I was in the horse racing industry for 17 years and I am currently in my present job for eight years and I decided to go get an education for myself' (LRN 2)

'Up to this time last year I was working as a full time Manager over a child care service it was a 20 minute drive so last year I made a big decision to quit working full time and find a part

time job, I found a part-time job and then wanted to go back to study because the balance of home life and work life suited me more, it was the best of both worlds' (LRN 3)

'I realised that I needed to go to college to better myself. When I completed my Leaving Certificate my parents couldn't afford to send me to college and so I went straight to work. After a few years, well actually 10 years, I realised that if I was to progress in the workplace, then I needed to get a degree. So, I suppose you could say I became a part-time student because I couldn't be a full-time student and I became a part-time student to better myself and make a better future for myself' (LRN 5)

"I wanted to understand Supply Chain Management because I am involved in transport, initially I wanted to study transport law but there was no module that covers transport law so I decided on the full Supply Chain degree but each module that you do gives you a better understanding of it, obviously you have to understand the road traffic act which is the one that mostly covers my area but then I am involved in an international import and export business, company law and international law is important also and the others modules too' (LRN 10)

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

'This is a massive opportunity and one I am glad to avail of. This is my ticket to a better future'

(LRN 12)

Finally, some were postgraduate students who had decided to further their education.

'So, I suppose you could say I became a part-time student because I couldn't be a full-time student and I became a part-time student to better myself and make a better future for myself. Now I want to keep learning and after the Masters would love to do a Ph.D………………………… I would love to continue to a Ph.D – imagine I'm in my mid-thirties and I might start a Ph.D – it's never too late to learn. (LRN 5)

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

- *Support from the college*

The majority of the comments were very positive about the colleges.

'You are supported by the college there is only so much you can do because it is down to the students to actual do the work and to manage our time' (LRN 1)

'In fairness the classes are hard but if you are doing something that you are enjoying and that you want to do you will manage it. Maybe more could be done around part-time supports for students like me with dyslexia' (LRN 2)

'I hear some of the students within the Lifelong Learners within our group expressing they are not being supported by the college, they are a little out of their depth but as a group we support each other. You can see when you login into blackboard all the support systems are there, everyone is aware that they are there, I know where to go within the college if I feel under pressure and I need to go to somebody for a support system, I don't feel we are unsupported as mature students. The lecturers are absolutely brilliant, everyone's experience is completely different'   (LRN 3)

'Yes we do get very good support from the college. However, I hate exams, why do we have to do them?'   (LRN 9)

'I was looking at another course in UCC but the parking was a nightmare, you have a fabulous gym here, people are very friendly and helpful here, definitely the supports are there, when you are studying yourself at night you have to take a bit more initiative yourself because you don't have the same contact hours as the day students have, you have to be willing to do a bit more independent research and study yourself. The supports are definitely there if people need them, if we approached any of the lecturers for help they would never refuse to help they were always very willing to help us'   (LRN 7)

- *Support from the state*

There were concerns expressed in relation to support or lack of support available from the state.

'I'm very lucky to be funded by Springboard because the state is dreadful when it comes to funding part time students. The lack of financial support is crippling for the majority'
                                                                                                                                                     (LRN 12)
'You get no relief what so ever, I sold my car to do this. The Taoiseach is in charge and he is not going to do anything to help me, he will pat me on the back and say well done Paula you are doing great work for yourself but there is no incentive from the state to support me or other part time students'   (LRN 10)

'If you are in Long Term Unemployment they offer you an education a chance to study, if you are really motivated to be a student and you don't have enough money it is very much a struggle, the state do not support you. If you know where to get a tax rebate or a grant from the state to financially help you it would be good, but the state really don't encourage it at all, I think a lot of politicians and policy makers have gone to college and are settled in departments or they have come in from leaving cert up through to the top of the Civil Service and their field of vision is very narrow'   (LRN 9)

'I think the state should support them by not charging as much as they do, for the student is bringing a lot of experience, they are very focused, they know what they want, they come by choice rather than the person that get sent by parents who believe in education but them themselves don't believe in education and they believe the institution is more important than the education, I think the government can do a lot in trying to assist and encouraging adult learners or citizens to go back to education for the betterment of the country and the level of the citizens education will aid any country. The best support students get is from their families'
                                                                                                                                                      (LRN 6)

'I think they should have more Lifelong Learning centres around the country to enable people to study at night, it is fantastic for people but some people cannot afford to give up their day job, the state could support more with finances, you do get a tax rebate but it is very minable, anything over €1500 it is a very small amount, I had factor that in but that might be a deterrent for other people that have young families and mortgages, financing from the state could be improved' (LRN 7)

'There is no support for part-time students, I opted to work lower hours I have taken a financial hit to go back to college. Skillnet have supported with funding, which is great and hopefully they will do it again next year and the year after. Financially this is our family holiday, I am working paying tax, you are never recognised in the childcare profession and I think we have just got used to it. As a lifelong learner it is my decision to go back but it is also a decision on the government that they want us to be trained to this level, they are not supporting our training up to this level nor are they helping us back in tax they are not giving any additional incentive. There is a lack of finance. There are some women in the Lifelong learning group that are working a 40 hour week and are coming straight in here after leaving work at six for seven who have families, I am lucky that I don't work those hours but if I was in that position I wouldn't be here' (LRN 3)

- *Learner supports*

The lack of formal supports for some of the part-time mature students was also a feature that came through the interviews with many of the interviewees unaware of any supports at their institute for mature learners. LRN 5 reported that there were no supports at their institute except for a little bit of extra maths tuition if required from the Teaching & Learning Centre.

'I think the Teaching and Learning Centre put on extra classes for maths, I think emails went out on that' (LRN 5)

LRN 7 was aware of some of the supports that were available for all students in her institute but she thought that there were many other students who were not aware that the support was available.

'The supports are definitely there if people need them, if we approached any of the lecturers for help they would never refuse to help they were always very willing to help us. Email go out about support but I don't think people really engage with the supports as being part time it is different' (LRN 7)

LRN 10 thought more could be done:

'When I came in first and I am a certain age I hadn't done an essay for 20 to 30 years the level that is expected is very high and my first essay was appalling, I know there is a course but I do believe for the part-timers there should be a little bit more than that like a drop in centre'

(LRN 10)

LRN 11 wasn't aware of any supports in her college:

'I'm not really aware of supports. I just come in and go to class and leave again. I'm on a short course so it's probably not relevant to me' (LRN 11)

In the institute that LRN 6 was attending financial assistance was available for part-time mature learners but difficult to navigate:

'I guess the colleges are trying all they can, it can be improved, it is a challenge to try and fit in the responsibilities of being a returning or an adult learner, if the colleges could dedicate a full weekend into bringing the students on board by taking them out of the environment of where they are away from their everyday engagements and look at the syllabus that is being taught and make time to discuss how the students are working and what they have learned or discuss what they will be looking at . Our college has assistance fund for students for first time this year. They said it was new for part time students but it is very difficult to navigate and there is a lot of paperwork' (LRN 6)

LRN 12 was given an induction pack when he started his course with information about the various supports that were available:

'The college is great, supports are available for those who need them' (LRN 12)

- *Reported learner experience*

The overall experience of being a part-time mature learner was reported as being a hugely positive one and every single interviewee reported that they would recommend to a family member or friend thinking of returning to college as a part time mature student *to go for it.*

'*Yes do it, I would give them a few assignments to start on it. I would encourage them'*
(LRN 1)

'Definitely go, and go to a career guidance counsellor first to get a definite path to what will suit you because there is no point in going and doing a course and finding out nah I don't like it at all, to get ready for work especially if you are working full time there will be a lot of work to do but I think it has been so positive so I'd say do it' (LRN 2)

'I found it mainly positive because I know I can do it; I feel sorry for myself that I didn't do it sooner but than if I had of done it sooner I may not have appreciated it or I wouldn't have the same positive experience. It wouldn't have worked two years ago but it is working now………………………………………… they might just need a little push to say do it'

(LRN 3)

'I have had great experience, negative only would be it's hard regarding time to juggle life, work and study, but that is what you get with being a mature student, and you are not a young fella with no commitments……………… Do it definitely, if you are thinking of it at all I would definitely encourage it 100%, you won't regret it, the worst that can happen is that you come out with a qualification and you wouldn't use it, you might use it sometime but either way you will still have it, I don't think you will be sorry you ever done it' (LRN 4)

'In the main it's been hugely positive…………………………………I really encourage them to go for it. I'm a real believer in education and opening new doors. I'd help them work out which course they wanted to do and support them in any way possible – after all lifelong learning is learning from the cradle to the grave'   (LRN 5)

'Very positive……………………….I would say go for it, it is so much enhancing you will discover yourself as an adult, and when you do that and taking in the present scenario of the advancement that there is now in the world technically it is good'   (LRN 6)

'I would say it has been very positive, I have enjoyed it and there is times I do find the going tough but I would say that is more to do with events going on in my own life…… I would say go for it, if there was something you wanted to do go for it because it gives you great freedom you can study, you can work, you can have your family life you can you can do everything, it is not as big commitment as if you were going back during the day, what I thought was really good and was a big incentive for me with our course it is four years part-time at night but if you want to exit after year two you can leave with your diploma that to me was a real carrot if I felt that I could leave it for a few years and come back , people have different demands in life so that for me was very significant personally'   (LRN 7)

'Mainly positive, the negatives are only due to stress and personal understanding on how to do things, once you overcome that little obstacle and when you get your results back it gives you that incentive and that little extra motivation it is like I have done really well and I want to keep going. I want to do this for my family who have been wonderfully helpful to me………….. In the main I'd say it's tough but doable'   (LRN 8)

'Not without its challenges but it's been a positive experience……….I would tell them to go for it, absolutely, I got my sister to enrol last September to do graphic design, I would recommend anyone to go back to college, I would say if you had any insecurities or if that you were nervous, because it is quite nerve wrecking coming into a huge big campus and you are surrounded by younger people, to just bear in mind that it is going to be a positive experience, the more you put into to it the more you will get out of it, no one is going to spoon feed you, you have to go and get the information yourself , your lecturers lecture you, you go and digest that and find out what you have to find out, I would tell anyone to go to college'   (LRN 9)

'Positive very much so……… I would tell them to go for it, give it a lash have the craic. I found when I came in people were lovely, there is people my age and my children's age and you look at them at you say fair play to them they are doing a part-time course and holding down a full-time job it is brilliant to see. I have the height of admiration for all of us who are working and are in part time education and I don't think the country recognises that enough, there should be some sort of acknowledgement of the fact that people are down here paying over €10,000 before they are qualified. Some people have said to me go and work in the Oireachtas but I would not have the discipline I am too old and I would be working with younger people and the environment that I am working in at the moment is very male orientated, there is a lot of swear words used I would have to tone myself down. You are never too old to learn, I got my mother who is 87 to do a beginners' computer course so as she could have the skills to Skype family abroad'   (LRN 10)

'Great experience…………You are never too young or too old to learn' (LRN 11)

'I love it. I have loved every minute of it… it's transformative and changes lives., I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to be honest………………….I'd say to them, you'd be mad not to avail of the opportunity' (LRN 12)

The reported learner experience was even more fully appreciated in speaking with and meeting those interviewed, as before and after the recorder started and stopped, the initial chat and conversation reaffirmed the positive impact that higher education was having on the part-time mature learner's lives.

5.6 Chapter conclusion

The findings in this chapter reflect the reported lived experiences of the part-time mature lifelong learners. There were a number of expected findings such as the difficulty part-time mature students face in terms of finance, work-life balance and time management. However, as this type of study had not previously been conducted specifically with this cohort in this sector we can now say with certainty that these factors affect part-time mature lifelong learners in the IoT sector. The extent to which part-time mature learners are under pressure cannot be overstated. Findings from this study show that part-time mature students appreciate that there are a number of issues that affect their participation in higher education including finance, childcare and time management issues, however, they also recognise the support and efforts that the colleges have implemented to facilitate part-time mature students in their respective institutes. The results of this study appear to show a shift away from the more traditional barriers and challenges related to age and computer use with part-time mature students in this research expressing neither concern with their age nor any issues with using information technology.

Johnston and Merrill (2004, p. 2) suggests, 'particular life stories demonstrate how learning experiences are shaped by the dialectics of agency and structure.' The stories and experiences of the 12 interviewed were presented to give a sense of the reality and authenticity of their experiences and to illuminate the complexity of their lives and what higher education means to them. These stories are discussed more thematically in the next chapter. Possible signs of a transformative learning experience were reported by some of the learners. Further down the road it would be interesting to test this initial finding by revisiting the learners so as to ascertain post-graduation the impact on their lives. The lived experiences of part-time mature lifelong learners that were reported in this study are reflective of the existing literature related to comparable students in other sectors, particularly related to the negative aspects

associated with being a part-time mature learner. Some of the feelings of achievement and success that were reported came almost as a surprise to the students themselves. Many referred to their particular life stage, middle age which may have some significance in terms of how people can use education as a tool through which they can find their 'true self'.

The honesty with which the participants responded is to be admired. Broadly speaking, the experience was reported as being a positive one, but there were some issues around communications within college group work which appeared to be an issue for a number of learners. The findings are analysed in the following discussion chapter and the findings presented here are pivotal to the recommendations that are made in chapter 7.

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.0 Chapter introduction

This discussion chapter provides a detailed analysis of the findings outlined in chapter five, using interpretive phenomenological analysis which is informed both by the literature review and the role of this researcher as Head of a Faculty of part-time mature students in the IoT sector. The IPA method recognises the interpretive role of the researcher and thus, the influence of his personal attitudes and experiences to the interpretation of the data is acknowledged, however, every effort was made to ensure that a balanced and measured interpretation has been applied. The beginning of the chapter has been divided into separate sections: Situational Barriers, Institutional Barriers and Dispositional Barriers that impact on part-time mature students participating in higher education. Prior to each section, a brief definition of the barrier will be provided to refresh the readers' memory as to the significance of each barrier to part-time mature students. In each of these sections, the author intends to relate the findings from this study with previous research and studies and rationalise as to why these findings are as such. The author is conscious that this further validates the existing literature but does little to improve our understanding. Therefore, after this, the discussion will move to focus on the most interesting and unique aspects of the findings including firstly, the application of Mezirow's transformative learning model to the narratives of the interviewees; secondly, the positive and negative aspects of the lived experience of the part time mature students; and finally, the way in which mature learners are and may be classified.

6.1 Individuals' life situation issues – situational barriers

The first theme discussed relates to situational barriers and how they impact on part-time mature students participating in higher education. To reiterate and refresh the reader's memory, situational barriers are recognised as barriers that relate to an individual's life situation at a particular time, including both the social and physical surroundings that they find themselves in. These issues, according to Cross (1981), include personal circumstances revolving around the cost and time problems of attending higher education, concerns regarding appropriate childcare arrangements for part-time mature students to participate and the actual geographical location of the third level institute, which, in itself, due to travel difficulties, may be perceived as a barrier.

6.1.1 Financial concerns

The majority of participants both in the survey and the interview, expressed the opinion that the cost of things such as books, learning materials and tuition is a concern when considering participating in higher education. Surprisingly, this belief is in contrast to a previous study

undertaken by Burton *et al.* (2011) who, exploring barriers to learning for mature students studying higher education in a Welsh Further Education College, opined that financial concerns were not seen as a major barrier for participants. However, students involved in this Welsh study benefited from the availability of significant grants, which in certain circumstances allowed them to be better off studying than being on some form of benefit. Over half of all participants in this study, expressed the opinion that finance was a major or an overwhelming concern, with students emphasising that it was 'one of the biggest issues that kept them from participating'. This is worrying when we see that funding and monetary issues are considered to be the most substantial barrier to participation in higher education (Murray *et al.*, 2010). This outlook is similarly reported by Darmody and Fleming (2009) and McCoy and Byrne (2011) who argue that one of the biggest hurdles to continuing one's education is often financial constraint. This financial commitment to partake in studying is perceived by many adult learners as too great or could exert too much hardship on the student and their families. Within the study a number of students articulated that they had taken out loans to attend higher education and acknowledged that '*it was a big risk to take…*' (LRN 2). The author proposes that these obstacles can be reduced with the availability of financial support for part-time mature students participating in higher education. This outlook is supported from findings within this study which show that whilst no student who was in receipt of some form of bursary or grant expressed that they were 'better off' in higher education, it was apparent that they did not see cost as a significant concern. There have been some improvements over the past number of years with regard to financial support for students, such as the introduction Springboard+ funding for programmes though this is only available to a small cohort of students. In the main, part-time higher education programmes are not funded. Whilst the author recognises that we still have a considerable amount of work to do if we wish to eradicate financial constraints as a barrier, it is important to note that in a comparison study exploring adults' participation in higher education in 13 European countries, the Republic of Ireland was the only country that provided every fourth adult learner with a study grant (Saar *et al.*, 2014). It is important to note that the latter does not necessarily mean that the Republic of Ireland has an ideal system, but may tend to perform better than the other observed countries. However, it is eschewed by the fact that the study relates to full-time rather than part-time adult learners.

6.1.2 Childcare

Findings within the survey and interviews indicated that childcare was not a major issue when considering participating in higher education and was of no significant concern. To overcome the hurdle of childcare, some women within the study had postponed attending higher education until they had 'reared their children' as they suggested that childcare and further education together would not have been feasible. This finding correlates with Flynn *et al.*

(2011) who argue that family responsibilities, particularly childcare, are the greatest barriers to women's participation in higher education. This finding is further supported by previous literature that shows women have little energy or time to study, as domestic duties and childcare were mostly identified as a female responsibility (Scott *et al.,* 1998; Russell *et al.,* 2002). This lack of participation in higher education secondary to childcare is identified by Maunsell *et al.* (2008) in the *National Report on Lifelong Learning in Ireland*. They recognise that flexible needs-based childcare support for adults is the key to participation. These supports could include the provision of childcare facilities and availability of trained childcare personnel in the educational premises. Where this initiative has been implemented, evidence has shown that participation of part-time mature students' increases (Hayes, 2012).

An additional reason why childcare was not identified as a major concern relates to the help that participants receive from their partners and families. Virtually all the parents involved in the study depended on family for child-minding needs and without this "service" they would have been unable to attend higher education. This finding is not unique to this study alone. Kaldi and Griffiths (2013) report parental support with childcare is essential, especially for working mothers, whose children are often looked after by grandparents, if they wish to continue in higher education. It is no surprise that the above observation is from research undertaken in Greece where family involvement and interaction is very strong within society comparable to the Republic of Ireland. The author is cognisant that this study focuses on part-time mature students who are currently partaking in higher education who receive support with childcare from their partners/family. The author further recognises that there may be part-time mature lifelong learning students out there who do not have the solace of partners/family to assist with childcare to enable participation in higher education such as lone parents, non-nationals etc. Further study exploring this area, in the author's opinion, is required. The concept of issues regarding familial support is further discussed in the following section.

6.1.3 Family issues and support

The level of support that an individual receives from family and friends can greatly affect the likelihood of them engaging in educational programs (Flynn *et al.*, 2011). This position is corroborated within this research where the vast majority of respondents and interviewees recognised the importance of familial support when undertaking their studies. This included, as previously mentioned, child-minding, as well as transport, emotional support and as one interviewee stated 'them being my rock'. The author believes that this familial support is secondary to societal changes over the past number of years in the Republic of Ireland. Where once third level education was seen as an 'ivory tower' for the rich and elite, it is now being seen as more accessible for many students, with parents wanting and supporting their children

to do better than themselves. The importance of this informal support is evident within the literature with Kaldi and Griffiths (2013) suggesting that support provided by family members and friends is the most important type of support for mature students. Similar to findings from this study, Kaldi and Griffiths (2013) show that family and peer support helped to sustain and encourage the students to continue with their learning and without this support continual education would have been impossible. This finding is further corroborated by Belcheir (1998) who states that students who have support from home are more likely to succeed and were also listed as "top achievers", whereas students who have to "go it alone" were the ones who did not succeed.

Unfortunately, not all research denotes that all mature students receive support from family and peers. Bamber and Tett (2000) emphasise that negative attitudes from family and friends can include the stigma that 'education is for other people', elaborating further that students are at risk of isolating themselves from their community, a concept Alford and James (2007) advocate is compounded by 'individual and institutional racism'. This idea is prevalent when potential learners from lower socioeconomic groups are considering returning to higher education (Bamber and Tett, 2000). Brannstrom (2007) argues that their social environment also influences an individual's beliefs or expectations of the gains of higher education. Bamber *et al*. (1997) surmises that one reason for this may be because people from non-participating groups are expected to fit into the existing education system rather than the system being changed to suit excluded groups. Previous Irish research exploring this issue has shown students from a professional parental background have maintained their privileged access to higher education, while other groups such as those from a manual skilled parental background and those from unemployed households fare less well (McCoy and Byrne, 2011). Findings from this study contradict this viewpoint with the majority of students coming from an unskilled, semi-skilled or manual skilled parental background. The author argues that this disparity is as a result of the availability of appropriate courses that are appealable to this cohort of students as well as the openness of the IoT sector to part-time mature learners from these backgrounds.

6.1.4 Time issues
Time constraints were seen as a considerable issue that impacted on students participating in higher education. Almost three quarters reported that not having enough time to complete coursework and attend college was a concern. This is not surprising when we consider that the vast majority of students have dependants and also work full-time. These external commitments limiting the time that they are able to invest in their education Barnett (2010) suggests may affect their motivation to continue with their higher education. These time pressures were somewhat reduced by students making personal sacrifices including getting

up early and going to bed later, doing chores at night or at the weekend, preparing dinners in advance, etc. This scaling down of domestic demands to the barest essentials during the course is similar to previous findings from Kaldi and Griffiths (2013) and Maguire (2005). As with childcare, time issues were seen to be more of an issue for the female participants than their male counterparts. This again is supported by previous literature that shows women have little energy or time to study, as domestic duties and childcare were mostly identified as a female responsibility (Scott *et al.,* 1998; Russell *et al.,* 2002). This balancing act between college and home responsibilities may ultimately impact on their work in addition to their continued participation in higher education. Barnett (2010) suggests that adult learners tend to be more concerned with their work and family responsibilities than they are about their actual performance once entering the classroom. To address this, higher educational institutes need to be cognisant of part-time mature student's needs when designing curricula ensuring that the design appreciates the contingencies of family life and the pressures, which part-time mature students face. Students within this study proposed that assessments could be somewhat more spread out utilising different assessment methods, such as formative methods over summative. Students argue that this would help considerably with their already overstretched time. There would be wisdom in adopting this approach as assessment can significantly and positively impact on student learning if students are active partners in the process (Brown and Race, 2014).

Issues surrounding time do not only impact on the individual's home life but also influence the student's college life. Unlike their traditional counterparts, part-time mature learners have less time on campus due to work and family responsibilities as well as increased travel times. Chaves (2006) argues that as a result of these barriers, creating a sense of involvement and developing a learner identity for adult learners may be more difficult. Interestingly, within this study, students expressed that they were quite happy not to be too involved within student life of their colleges, with some students concerned that they would be expected to join unions, clubs, etc. It was evident that within their own courses, students had formed their own bonds and identities. The author argues that this disassociation with the student life and clubs and societies is a loss for the colleges in terms of community building with part-time mature learners. Participating in higher education is about a lot more than the academic experience and it is vital that as the HE moves forward, colleges are cognisant of this finding, ensuring that part-time mature learners are seen as important components in the working of their institute/college.

6.2 Organisational issues – institutional barriers

The second theme the author will discuss relates to institutional barriers and how these impact on part-time mature students participating in higher education. These barriers are those that are created by educational institutes that exclude or dissuade certain learners from participating in higher education due to such things as problematic schedules, fees, policies and procedures with unintentional negative facets, deterring locations and the like.

6.2.1 Institutional support

Institutional support for mature students in their decision to enter and remain in higher education is regarded by some authors as being the most influential factor in retention and course completion (Heenan, 2002; Yorke and Longden, 2004).

Part-time mature students within this study were over achingly positive in their approbation of their institute regarding support. They felt that their institute was, in the main, supportive of them as they progressed through their course. This was evident with the content of the interviews filled with words like 'excellent' and 'brilliant' when describing the staff and facilities of their college. This finding conflicts with research results of Archer and Leathwood (2003) and Brosnan (2013) who exploring opinions of institutional staff, showed that they believed that higher education was no place for mature learners, and were unsympathetic to this cohort explicitly for learning and personal supports. Contrastingly, the majority of part-time mature learners expressed the opinion that lecturers were in the majority always available to discuss issues either face-to-face or by email, were friendly and approachable, were knowledgeable about their subject area and were simply 'nice'. The author contends that this is as a result of the ethos of the IoT's as well as the close working relationships that are formed between institutional staff and students across the IoT sector. This is a value we need to be wary of not to lose as we move forward with the progression of the technological university. Fortunately for the sector, research has shown that a supportive educator who pays attention to the needs of the mature learner will also be able to organise his or her educational practice in a clear way, which in turn will end up with more satisfied adult learners (Boeren *et al.,* 2012). If students are more satisfied and feel comfortable in and accepted by the college community, Osgood-Treston (2001) argues that they tend to stay longer. The author recognises that this is not something that can occur overnight but something that requires time and resources. Working supportively with mature learners, Bamber and Tett (1999) argues is a teacher intensive business but is absolutely necessary if higher education is to become truly inclusive. Educational institutes will have to respond to the fact that there will be an increasing number of non-traditional learners demanding more open and flexible ways of learning. On a national stage, Ireland fares well in comparison to other countries in the European Higher Education

Area (EHEA), having a range of policies and structures in place aimed at supporting adult students in the higher education system (Brosnan, 2013). The IoT's in this study demonstrated an acknowledgment of the importance of their part-time mature learners, recognising the need for tailor made supports, appreciating that part-time mature learners start from different places and learn in different ways and need to be empowered to access the learning that is right for them. The provision of part-time higher education programmes in the IoT sector through departments of Lifelong Learning is testament to acknowledging part-time mature students access HE.

Prior to commencing their courses, students stated that they were provided with sufficient information concerning the requirements and content of the course. They had no concern with paperwork regarding the admissions to their Institute. This is of significance when we consider that without this initial guidance and support students may not decide to pursue higher education (Hodkinson et al., 2006). This is further supported when one considers that the structural and cultural characteristics of an educational institute such as the availability of useful facilities and guidance services help sustain participation in higher education (Bamber et al., 1997).

6.2.2 Institutional concerns

Data analysis of the interviews and surveys yielded interesting findings in relation to the challenges and concerns part time mature students have regarding timetabling, academic writing, their colleges' website and online learning tools.

Several individuals highlighted the issue that the timetabling, specifically the exam timetable, is somewhat haphazard and ill prepared. Cross (1981) states that these difficulties with timetabling of classes represent valid examples of an institutional barrier. Part-time mature students lead highly complex lives with a multitude of responsibilities and, therefore, the importance of timetabling is paramount. One of the biggest issues relating to timetabling was how late it was provided to students. This is of significant concern when we consider that research shows that part-time mature learners require timetables well in advance to make the necessary domestic and employment arrangements (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002). These arrangements, as previously considered, include the issue of childcare. It is important to reflect on this issue as research suggests that when developing course timetables for part-time mature learners, institutes should have childcare responsibilities in mind (Burton *et al.,* 2011), however, it should be noted that altering timetables might inadvertently have a reverse effect. For example, Saar *et al.* (2014) identify that attending classes at the weekend or in the evening may create further childcare problems or issues with transport.

Two of the biggest concerns students had related to academic writing and their colleges virtual learning environment (VLE) and course management system. Some students, for example, had advanced from level 6 to level 7 and expressed the opinion that this was a considerable leap, especially with what was expected from them with their assignments. They explained that the concerns related to both academic writing and the VLE could be reduced if an introductory and orientation module was available, both at the start of semesters and also throughout the academic year. This finding consolidates Cahill's (2014) findings, where she argues that it is pertinent that programmes of education focus courses around adult learning principles and address various learning life cycles. This acknowledgement of andragogical aspects of learning, the author believes, will go some way towards allaying these real fears and concerns.

When asked, students had no issue with the methods of course delivery. They appreciated that lectures occurred at the most opportune time for the part-time mature learner although some students did comment that some classes were at times that they could not attend. Research has shown that this time management issue is a key area that higher educational institutes need to consider. Hoyt and Allred (2008) suggest that these issues could be addressed by offering flexible course schedules with a selection of modules that support working part-time mature students, including both night and weekend classes as well as online courses. As seen by Saar *et al.* (2014), this may result in further drawbacks. One needs to consider, whilst the introduction of modularisation into many higher education courses has enabled greater flexibility and responsiveness to student's needs, this itself has introduced new concerns. It is argued that modularisation has resulted in courses being so heavily timetabled that students' opportunity for independent and self-directed learning is significantly curtailed (National Strategy for Higher Education, 2011). Nonetheless, within this study, the majority of students enjoyed the classroom experience and interactions with fellow learners. Attending college permitted them to access the library and engage with lecturers and peers. Although the majority of respondents were confident in the use of computers and Information Technology, they felt that the best way of delivery was in class lectures. This finding is in contrast to Cahill (2014) who suggests that mature (adult) learners prefer blended learning or virtual education. The author argues that this disparity may be due to the fact that the participants' prior exposure to education may have almost exclusively been delivered utilising a 'chalk and talk' approach. We all become institutionalised across our years of education and it is incumbent on institutes to challenge this possible institutionalisation and lead students to the realisation that blended learning can result in a more autonomous and sophisticated learner. Whilst it can be argued that blended learning allows students to continue working and

meet family responsibilities, the author argues that it can lead to student isolation and a lacklustre approach to learning. Although one would imagine that the use of distant learning would result in a reduction of institutional barriers, research shows the opposite (Saar *et al.,* 2014). The research surrounding this concept appears to be somewhat inconclusive. In a Scandinavian study, Hovdhauhen (2011) established that change to course structures and delivery has no effect on dropout rates. Based on the data from this study, the author suggests that a balance needs to be achieved to best serve adult learners within IoT sector and recommends further research into this area. To facilitate this research, the sector must embrace pioneering teaching methodologies, allow them to run and then analyse their outcomes. Being conservative and cautious in approach is commendable, providing it speaks to students' needs, however, if meeting students' needs requires us to be daring and original in approach, it is incumbent on the HE to live up to that and excel, especially as some institutes push forward to become a technological university.

6.2.3 Geographical issues

International research has shown that geographical location and accessibility is an important driver for higher education participation (Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012; Spiess and Wrohlich, 2010; Frenette, 2006; Sá *et al.,* 2006). This is a concern when one considers that Walsh *et al.* (2015) deem the south east of the Republic of Ireland as having poor accessibility to higher education, specifically universities. The majority of students surveyed lived less than 30 kilometres from their institute which correlates with findings from a recent Irish study that showed students who live closer to a higher educational institute are more likely to participate in higher education (Cullinan *et al.,* 2013). The majority of students who were interviewed did not raise the location of the institute as a concern but did raise the issue of travel costs especially when travelling long distances from rural communities. Other research looks at the way that students can dwell in their mobility in their commuting practices (Holton and Finn, 2018). One student articulated that the distance she drove was a 'pain' and 'one thing she had to put a lot of thought into'. This was highlighted by Cullinan *et al.* (2013) who reports that those living in rural settings may well face higher costs, since most higher education institutions tend to be located in urban areas. Students within the study appreciate that having access to their institute has reduced these barriers. Interestingly, Walsh *et al.* (2015) suggest that the founding of the new technological universities in the Republic of Ireland will result in a marked improvement in geographic accessibility to university education, especially in the south east of the country. Walsh *et al.* (2015) further argue that with this introduction of the technological university, poor mobility and institutional location may not pose a major challenge in the future as most regions will have good accessibility to university level education. This is of significant importance for the part-time mature learner, not merely in terms of financial costs, but also in

terms of their available time to engage in paid employment and hence, the ability to support their studies.

6.3 Individual psychosocial/attitudinal Issues – dispositional barriers

The next theme the author will discuss relates to dispositional barriers and how they impact on part-time mature students participating in higher education. Again, to refresh the reader's memory, these barriers are those individually held values and beliefs influenced by past experiences that inhibit participation in organised education (Broek and Hake, 2012). These past experiences include the influences of past educational experiences, age and personal circumstances.

6.3.1 Age issues

Findings from this study show that age is not seen as a concern for part-time mature students participating in higher education. This attitude correlates with McDonald (2003) whose research findings showed being too old to participate in higher education is of little concern to students. Whilst McDonald (2003) gives no reasoning for this result, the author proposes that age may no longer be an issue in Irish higher educational establishments due to the changing demographic within these institutes. It is evident within the research that over the past number of years, adult participation in higher education has increased considerably (Darmody and Smyth, 2008; Further Education and Training Authority, 2015). Students in the study appreciated the personal, economic and societal benefits of participating in further education. This appreciation, whilst not unique to the older student, is often mentioned in the literature with older graduates citing the wider benefits of learning as their motivation (Jamieson, 2007). Whilst students may not see age as a barrier to participating in higher education, older adult learners might encounter other barriers related to ageing that could influence their motivation to learn. One barrier identified in the literature relates to older students not being accepted into higher educational institutes. This was evidenced in research by Archer and Leathwood (2003) and Brosnan (2013), which identified that institutional staff considered higher education to be no place for older students. Lin (2011) explains that this age bias is not only apparent with lecturers but can also originate from older adults themselves, where they might have negative attitudes towards becoming active participants in education. These stereotypes can result in adult learners having challenges in higher education.

Whilst not identified in this research, Kelly (2004) stresses that older learners can experience a sense of alienation, of being outsiders and not 'owning' higher education. As a result of this isolation, age in turn becomes a divisive factor. Contrastingly, within this study, part-time mature students expressed the opinion that they felt very much included and part of their

institute. The author argues that this is due to the fact that IoT sector has smaller class sizes, is teacher-led compared to its university equivalents, and learners are at the centre both of the institutes mission and of its strategic review (see any of the websites of the five Institutes involved in this research). This argument is supported by Souto-Otero (2011) who maintains that stratified higher educational systems, such as research-intensive universities are much more closed than teaching-led institutes in the admission of older students, as they concentrate on a selective body of students rather than the individual. The challenge for the IoT sector is that as it expands and advances towards a technological university, it needs to retain this quality that makes the IoT's such a unique commodity for the part-time mature learner.

6.3.2 Confidence, fear and anxiety

The vast majority of respondents within the survey had no concerns regarding self-confidence, which was also voiced throughout the interviews. Students reported that this self-confidence was as a result of choosing the correct course and choosing a course specifically to further their own personal and professional lives. Boeren *et al.* (2012) found that those students who recognise the relevance of learning for their own lives are more likely to have confidence in their own abilities over those who participate because of external pressures. This confidence also correlated to students using computers. Over three quarters of those involved in the survey expressed the opinion that they were confident using computers which is somewhat surprising when we consider the disconnect that Prensky (2001) examines when he argues about the so-called "digital divide". Within this ideology, a disconnection may be present between those who have grown up with technology, digital natives, and older people, digital immigrants. It is apparent within the study that the vast majority would see themselves as digital natives regardless of their age. It is interesting to note that when planning the future of adult learning in Europe, Castaño Muñoz *et al.* (2013) propose that by 2030 adult learning will be ubiquitous and the digital divide will be less of an issue. It appears from this study, part-time mature students in the IoT sector are considerably ahead of the field on this matter.

Fear was a common emotion identified within this study. Higher educational professionals are often confronted with students who are so fearful of failing that, in the end, Haber (2013) suggests it may be the fear itself and not the difficulty of the task that prevents the student from achieving his or her academic goals. It should be no surprise that mature learners are fearful when we consider the alien world they find themselves in when they enter tertiary education. Unlike younger students, part-time mature students are often 'second chancers' who may have had little contact with education prior to entry. The author also argues that part-time mature students in comparison with their younger counterparts have 'a lot riding' on them

successfully completing the course such as financial loans and job security. Burton *et al.* (2013) suggest that these fears could result in students being debilitated and in turn impact on their studies. When asked, students within the study were, in the main, unaware of any services in their institute that they could access or contact if they had any fears or insecurities. This is somewhat perturbing when we note that contact with students early in the educational process seems to allay many fears associated with studying at a higher educational level (Burton *et al.,* 2013). The author argues that lecturers need to recognise that part-time mature learners require additional resources to prove to themselves and to others that they have the ability to work at, and succeed, as an academic without fear or anxiety.

6.3.4 Previous learning experience

Part-time mature students, like traditional students, are not homogeneous. Part-time mature students have certain distinct characteristics that they bring with them to the educational experience. Burton *et al.* (2011) suggests, appropriately, that they are in the middle of a process of growth, not at the start of a process. Part-time mature learners bring with them a package of previous learning experiences and it is important that the institute recognise that not all these experiences were positive. Whilst the majority of students had no concerns with their previous educational results and grades, a number of students did report that they had negative experiences both in secondary school and third level education. A proportion of these negative experiences were attributed to inadequate teaching support and a negative cycle of interaction with teaching staff. One student stated that she didn't have the greatest time in school as she wasn't that studious and believed that this wasn't helped by teachers with many of them 'leaving her to her own devices…'. McCoy and Byrne (2011), who examined barriers that young people face in accessing higher education, suggest that these experiences have a cultural perspective and it is important that these are understood to appreciate educational outcomes. One must also be cognisant that previous negative educational experiences can also impact on the student's confidence as they enter higher education. Crossan *et al.* (2003) insinuate that learners who have been involved in negative learning experiences in the past, have little faith in their own abilities and can have a weak self-image, which they argue can be a decisive factor in deciding whether to participate in educational activities.

One student within the study raised the concern that his previous non-educational experience was not considered when he applied for a course in an institute which he argued was somewhat unfair. This outlook is not unique. Hodkinson *et al.* (2006) argue that learning is not necessarily a distinct and identifiable part of one's life but can happen through the practice of daily living. This recognition of 'other' learning is somewhat being overlooked by educational institutes. Johnson and Locke (1990) and Bowl (2001) propose that mature students feel that

their life experience is not sufficiently acknowledged or valued which is concerning when we realise that validation of prior learning and experiences enhances retention of students (McDonald, 2003).   The most recent relevant recommendation from the Council of the European Union, recommends that all countries should have recognition of prior learning procedures in place by 2018 (Council of European Union, 2012). This recommendation underlines the strong commitment to recognising previous learning in Europe. As previously highlighted, educational institutes and staff need to be aware that a part-time mature student studying at higher education level is studying as an extended part of life rather than as a new stage in life (Toynton, 2005).

6.5 Transformative learning

As outlined in the literature review, Mezirow's theory of transformative learning advocates that education and, in particular, the self-reflection that occurs as part of it, can lead to "significant personal transformations" (Mezirow, 1997: 7).   Table 13 which follows has been advanced from table 6 which was presented in section 3.3.3, and draws on the narrative of one of the part-time mature learners (LRN 6), to trace the ten phases of transformative learning that Mezirow described.   LRN 6 was chosen because of the power of his story. Transformative learning is taken to mean transformation of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives, including how the individuals' view of themselves or their world has changed.   Evidence of such transformative learning could include changes in attitude, circumstances and feelings as opposed to a 'change of form' as advocated by Newman (2012). When analysing the transcript from LRN 6's interview, the author was struck by the various phases of Mezirow's transformative process that could be identified.   Therefore, the narrative was examined in relation to the ten phases and the evidence of each phase is presented in the last column.

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

which transformative learning has been measured to have occurred, is ultimately, the ten phases that were advanced by Meizrow.

6.5.1 Mezirow's theory as seen through a part-time matures students story: LRN 6 as the archetypal transformative learner

This section focuses specifically on one participant to examine Mezirow's theory. The power of his story and the huge transformation during his time as a part-time mature learner warrant this. Not only had his situation changed, but his approach and demeanour also changed. Prior to having the opportunity to study part-time he spoke of being aggressive and frustrated and curt but as a result of being engaged in HE, he felt much more relaxed and upbeat. His circumstances have changed considerably and most of it is down to his own determination and willingness to overcome difficulty and to pursue a course of action that he believed would, and ultimately did, improve his situation; a course of action that Freire would surely commend. The extracts from the interview, presented in table 11, help to demonstrate how LRN 6 progressed through the transformative phases Mezirow outlined. LRN 6 found himself with skills that were not required and despite fears about his academic ability and significant financial pressure, he decided to undertake a part-time college course that he believed would better position him to be successful economically, socially and personally. His resolve was concrete and in his own words "failure was not an option", but he realised that it was a possibility and took the chance anyway to shape his own future for the better.

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

Perspectives for mature (adult) learners can be transformed during their education, Mezirow references the housewife who realises that the other housewives on her course do not have to rush home to cook dinner for their husbands, and this transforms her meaning schemes. In this instance, LRN 6 was able to acknowledge that he was "lucky" not to have young children, however, he was under considerable financial stress. Seeing his situation as "lucky" is likely to have been influenced by his exposure to classmates who were juggling small children with

their return to education. This demonstrates how LRN6' meaning schemes have been affected by those with whom he shared his educational experience.

Table 13. Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning applied to part-time mature learner, LRN 6.

Phase	Mezirow's description of phase	Application to part time mature learners	Evidence from LRN 6's interview
1	A disorienting dilemma	Change in personal circumstances	*I happen to be an immigrant when I came to Europe and to Ireland specifically I wanted to get myself retrained in an avenue that was of interest to me because I live in a refugee camp*
2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame	Regret at not having pursued education sooner, feel potential has not been filled, fear of not being adequate	*Having started 29 years ago was the last time I sat for exams and to start education at my age now it was very fearful I was very scared I did not know what I was putting myself into……….. I would like to have done it before now but I didn't get a chance to*
3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions	Examination of their place in society on a personal, economic and social level	*I want to get myself into a position where I will be able to work within the social department and consequently at one of the refugee centres or should I say the socially excluded community where drug addiction is an issue I would like to be working with*

			the social excluded and counsel them. I really need to get out of the financial predicament I am in.
4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change	Relate to experience of other mature learners they may know or have observed returning to education	*I have a lot of experience and being a mature part time student has helped me in that sense as I can now see it is an advantage*
5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions	Explore the concept of being a student again, how will personal relationships be affected, how will they integrate with other students/lecturers	*It is over whelming, to try and fit it in you need to be competent, to be an adult learner needs commitment, I applaud those who have gone through this and have finished because it is a challenge. I am lucky that I haven't young kids now*
6	Planning a course of action	Considering finance, time management, childcare, personal relationships, travel, application process	*Our college has assistance fund for students for first time this year. They said it was new for part time students but it is very difficult to navigate and there is a lot of paperwork……. I am struggling financially*

7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans	Attending lectures, tutorials, self-directed learning, integrating with other students	*The hardest part would be as an adult you have life going on, you have to bring your study into a lot of problems that you are already carrying and trying to accommodate the academic requirements, the needs, the time requirements into your life at this age as an adult……………. the course itself is very intensive…as a mature student you have to be very focussed on what you're doing…As an immigrant I would really say it has actually made me grow as a person, it has changed my perspective my viewpoint with regards life and integration in Europe it is something I will never regret having done*
8	Provisional trying of new roles	Applying theory in laboratory practical, computer tutorials, work experience, research, undertaking assessments/exams	*It is a huge commitment and you have to spend a lot of time doing course work and exam study. Massive commitment*
9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships	Achieving learning outcomes, passing exams, gaining qualification, using skills in new setting e.g. workplace	*As an immigrant I would really say it has actually made me grow as a person, it has changed my perspective my viewpoint with regards life and integration in Europe it is something I will never*

			regret having done and it will stand to me for the rest of my life
10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective	Reassessment of oneself, reflecting back to phase one to review progress, determination as to how they and/or their circumstances have changed	*This course can change my life and help me into employment and help me gain financial independence and make a better life for me and my family*

(Adapted from Kitchenham, A. 2008: 105)

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

Subsequent to having traced LRN 6's transformational phases, the author sought to trace Mezirow's theory of transformative learning through data from all of the interview transcripts. Unlike LRN 6's narrative which very closely mirrors the phases outlined in the theory, when examined on a wider scale, there were aspects of the theory which could be applied at various points to the various transcripts but there was no other transcript that fitted the theory to the same extent. This part of the research was very much inductive as opposed to being deductive, it was the words and phrases from the narratives that prompted the further testing rather than having sought to make the narrative 'fit' into a model. Ultimately, the extent to which the narrative fit is somewhat subjective but the IPA method relies on the interpretation of the researcher and therefore it is my interpretation of the narratives that is used to determine whether or not they reflect the phases that Mezirow described. Phase one is presented here to give an overview of how this phase was evident in the narrative of some, but not all, of the learners.

6.5.2 Evidence from the interviews of the disorienting dilemma
The first phase, the disorienting dilemma was evident for some but not all of the participants in this research, and its form varied.
'You could say I became a part-time student because I couldn't be a full-time student and I became a part-time student to better myself and make a better future for myself' (LRN 5)

6.5.3 Evidence of transformative learning more broadly
Looking at the stories of the participants more broadly it appeared that the transformation was evident for a number of the participants and this is seen explicitly in some and implicitly in others. Just because the ten phases could not be exactly identified in the transcripts did not mean that a transformative experience did not take place. As the questions were not framed to search for the phases, it is possible that they may have occurred but were not captured in this research context.

6.5.3.1 Students who experience transformative learning

As outlined previously, LRN 6 had a transformative experience which resulted not only in a change in his life but also a new perspective on life. LRN 9 appears to have experienced a transformation too. When asked about the decision to return to third level she said, *"I have realised that I have a lot of ability as well …"*   (LRN 9)

LRN 9 believed this experience has awakened a love of learning in her. She plans to *"go and extend my education slightly further do a post graduate, or I might go and work for an organisation that I can bring my skills to"*

This author believes that many of the learners did not think explicitly about their transformation. Interestingly, this would indicate that the transformation that occurs is perhaps so subtle and gradual that it is difficult to detect for the individual who is transforming. From the researcher's perspective many of the learners had just described a transformation without perhaps realising it.

6.5.4 Pattern of transformative learning

The part-time mature learners who had previously studied to graduate level, LRN 1 and LRN 12, for example, did not overtly demonstrate any great evidence of transformative learning.

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

6.6 Part-time mature student's lived experience

For some of the participants in this research, the learning extended beyond their course content. They also learned about themselves, and in some cases it would seem were proud of how they had done. Also, there were a number of participants who outlined that they were at a stage in life where they cared less about what people think of them than

they might have when they were younger and this made them more confident; especially in relation to interacting with lecturing staff.

"I had some concern about the stress levels I would be putting myself under, as I am not the most confident of people, but I have been pleasantly surprised at how well I have coped." (LRN 11)

"Pleasantly surprised at how well I am doing" (LRN 4)

Some participants chose to reflect on their stage in life and specifically mentioned their age.

6.6.1 Negative feelings expressed by part-time mature learners

It was evident from findings in relation to assessments (section 5.3.5) some of the part time mature learners felt frustration. It was especially evident when it came to the area of academic writing as this was an area that a number of students expressed dissatisfaction with. Siedle (2011: 568) argues that the mature learner is very goal oriented and therefore, will appreciate a well organised and clearly defined programme and thus have very real expectations about what they need and want. However, Siedle believes that mature learners should not only be involved in the learning process but also in the decisions related to course content and should have a role in running the class. This would support the notion that part-time mature learner feedback should in some way be integrated into programme development and assessment strategies.

This type of frustration may not necessarily be negative from an educational perspective, especially if one accepts Dewey's assertion that knowledge is based on experience and that learning occurs through simultaneously doing and suffering. Using this philosophy, it would appear normal that students feel some level of discomfort or dissatisfaction during the process of education.

Many of the students experienced time pressure and difficulty managing their work/life balance when studying.

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

6.6.2 Positive feelings described by part-time mature learners

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

"Have found it a very enjoyable experience." (LRN 1)

"I am delighted that I did come back and study and I would tell anyone who is half thinking of studying to go and do it". (LRN 2)

"I should have went to college a long time ago…" (LRN 3)

"it's been hugely positive (LRN 5)

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

"I got a promotion after completing my degree and hope that I will get another after completing the Masters. Once I have my Masters, many more doors will be opened to me. It's onwards and upwards from here. … Now I want to keep learning and after the Masters would love to do a Ph.D." (LRN 5)

"I might go an extend my education slightly further do a post graduate" (LRN 9)

6.7 Categories of part-time mature students

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

Osborne *et al.,* (2004: 296) suggest that there are six categories of mature learners including *delayed traditional, late starter, single parent, careerist, escapees* and *personal*

growers and each category experiences various negative and positive factors that influence the decision to become a student. Some of the interviewees could be classified according to these categories but the researcher would suggest that the categories are not mutually exclusive.

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

6.8 Chapter conclusion

Within this chapter the author has discussed the findings found within this study and related these findings with previous research and studies and rationalised as to why these findings are such. Cost, seen in previous studies as a significant barrier, was not identified to be of consequence to participants in this study, however, it must be noted that a number of students were in receipt of financial assistance. Childcare interestingly, was acknowledged in the study to be more of an issue for female participants than their male counterparts and family support was seen as essential for students undertaking higher education. Rationale for these findings correlates with the 'societal norms' that can be identified within the Republic of Ireland. Time constraints were recognised as a significant barrier, which is unsurprising when we consider that the majority of adult learners have children and work full-time. Additionally, it was found that these time constraints not only impact on family and home life, but also impact on how students interact and engage with college life. Students within the study felt incredibly supported by their institutes and the staff of the institutes, however, concerns were highlighted

relating to timetabling, academic writing, and engagement with the VLE and course structure. Location of the institute was not a significant concern. It is further argued that the potential of the introduction of the Technological University will markedly improve on geographical and locational concerns. On exploring dispositional barriers, age was not seen as a barrier or concern amongst adult learners due to the changing demographics within higher education, with these students having considerable confidence in their own abilities. As with other studies pertaining to adult learners, part-time mature students within this study felt that their institute did not always consider their previous learning experiences, which is of concern when we consider that this recognition will result in enhanced student retention and learning experience.

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

The role of a part-time mature learner can be fraught with many concerns but there were many positive experiences also reported. This is truly reflective of the concept that learning is a process of suffering and doing. The outcomes of education are transformative but, at times, the process is painful and is set in an environment of financial stress, time pressure and guilt associated with lost time with family and friends. There appeared to be some confusion around the type and number of part-time mature

leaner support services that were available at the various IoTs that participated in this study.

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

Part-time mature lifelong learners who were studying exclusively with other mature learners did not report feelings of isolation within their class, but some did report feeling isolated from the student body more generally. Given the national and European efforts to increase levels of lifelong learning, policy makers should be aware of the impact that making students feel excluded could have. It is important to ensure that all students have access to a learning environment that is inclusive and encourages the cross fertilisation of ideas between students and learners at different levels and in different subject areas to improve educational outcomes.

While some learners will only engage in education with a view to reskilling and improving their employability, there are some who will initially attend higher education for that purpose but undertake further study. "The goal of education is to enable individuals to continue their education" (Dewey, 2004: 69), and this research identified part-time mature learners who fit this profile, further evidence of the transformation that has occurred. Acknowledging vocational education as a primary motivating factor for many part-time mature learners in this sector does not mean that the purpose of education as an end in itself is not relevant. Rather, it presents an opportunity to create a learning environment whereby vocational learning can occur in tandem with a more holistic development of the individual. The vocational education process need not be distinct from a transformational learning environment; rather it can provide the setting in which students transform themselves and how they view themselves in the world. Within the next section, the author will provide recommendations and findings relating to the above discussion, in addition to offering a conclusion to the research.

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Chapter 7 Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

7.1 Chapter introduction

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

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

For part-time mature students returning to higher education, money, family responsibilities, institutional problems, work commitments and fear of the unknown may exist. As higher educational institutes and educators, we have a responsibility and commitment to reach out to this cohort and ensure that the doors to higher education are always open. Based on the findings of this study, which explores how part-time mature students feel supported in becoming 'lifelong learners' in Irish Higher Education, the following recommendations are proposed.

7.2 Additional financial resources and assistance

An on-going central issue that is continually debated surrounding part-time mature participation in higher education concerns finance. Findings within this study reflect that a number of students struggle with finance, especially those not in receipt of financial assistance and who are self-funded. It is inevitable that this lack of financial resourcing will negatively affect entry, advancement and retention among part-time mature students.

Student grants are available exclusively to those studying on a full-time basis and leading to a major award, at NFQ Levels 6, 7 and 8. As well as not being eligible for a SUSI grant, part-time students are not eligible under the free-fees scheme either, meaning that their student fee can be significantly higher than the €3,000 per annum charged to eligible full-time students. Despite the national policy commitments to increase the numbers of part-time and flexible students, these funding arrangements for part-time students remain dissuasive. Hence, a fundamental recommendation from this study would be the allocation of additional funding to accommodate part-time mature learners in higher education. In addition to this recommendation, it is imperative that institutes and, more importantly, as a society, we give credence to the importance of further education and highlight that in certain situations short-term financial sacrifices will result in long-term benefits.

7.2 Provision of childcare services in higher education institutes

Issues surrounding childcare have been highlighted within this study, as it has also been within various other studies and reports, as a critical barrier to participating in higher education. The provision of childcare within the education sector is currently limited to participants on Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes (VTOS), Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Centre programmes. The author recommends that these childcare facilities be expanded to the higher education sector. The author recommends that these facilities charge a minimal fee and are means tested with staffing supplied by the college's own childcare training students to counter the additional resources required. Whilst the author is aware that this may require further investment and time, it is an area that the author feels should be explored.

7.3 Curriculum design

From this study, students identified that third level institutes need to develop processes that appreciate the contingencies of family life and the pressures which part-time mature students face and, in turn, be flexible in allowing them to attend courses without placing them under unreasonable stress. To promote more participation, the author believes that

more consideration should be given to these flexible learning arrangements – the key being to develop a learner-centred approach. This should include flexibility in timing and provision, expanding the range of delivery methods and adopting more adult friendly pedagogies. The author recommends that assessments be more evenly spread out within the academic year with utilisation of more formative assessment techniques rather than summative. The importance of this flexible delivery to support adult learning is fundamental and the author recommends that it should be considered in all programme development, design, delivery and timetabling.

7.4 Provision of orientation/induction programmes and continual education

Identified within the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Report of the Strategy Group, 2011), higher education institutions should prepare students better for their learning experience, so that they can engage with it more successfully. The author believes that this can be achieved with the provision of orientation programmes and subject-specific support from the perspective of the part-time mature learner. This support should have an explicit focus on academic writing and use of the VLE, two areas that were of particular concern within this study. The presence of dedicated personnel, such as the lifelong learning offices, should be in place across the sector. It is recommended that there should be specific computer lab areas within, for example, the Teaching and Learning Centres of the Institutes that are dedicated to part-time mature students' orientation and induction requirements. The author further recommends that orientation programmes should be run on an intermittent basis throughout the academic year and not just at the start of the year. Rationale for this recommendation comes from students within this study who explained that their problems became apparent when they began their course work, not before starting it. It is recommended that a purpose led academic writing module be incorporated into all courses where academic writing is required.

7.5 Education of staff regarding part-time mature student needs

The education of staff regarding teaching and learning, and the support needed for on-going development and improvement of these skills, is highlighted in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Report of the Strategy Group, 2011). Findings from this report show that higher education participation amongst part-time mature students will increase two-fold from 2015 to 2030. Results from the authors study have shown that not all adult learners are homogeneous and with this increase in part-time mature students, diverse teaching approaches will be essential. Hence, it is imperative that ongoing training for staff should always encompass the requirements and needs of

adult learners. The author recommends that this training be across faculties and departments, to ensure a high level of awareness of issues faced by part-time mature students. The training must include adult teaching and learning methodology for academic staff. Additionally, outside of the classroom, training should also be provided for administrative and student services staff, through the Teaching and Learning Centres, in how to support and meet the particular requirement needs of adult learners. Within each faculty department, the author recommends that a designated staff member is trained to work with part-time mature to meet the needs of this cohort of students.

7.6 Implementation of systems to acknowledge previous learning experiences

An instrument to overcome barriers to higher education that deserves explicit attention is the recognition of student's prior learning experiences. Whilst there is a commitment to recognising prior learning nationally, it is seen within this study that implementation is varied and somewhat inconsistent. The author recommends that higher education institutes need to pay attention to the skills that part-time mature students contribute to their learning and identify how these can be built on and developed further. As recommended by the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Report of the Strategy Group, 2011), the author concurs that a national policy and strategy should be developed and implemented across all higher education institutions providing an agreed definition of prior learning experiences. At a local level for each institution, the author recommends that guidelines be developed to provide a more concise and coherent approach to recognising previous learning, taking into consideration academic as well as 'other' learning. This initiative will see the institutes commitment to recognising prior learning and, in turn, meet the requirements outlined by the Council of the European Union that all countries should have recognition of prior learning procedures in place by 2018 (Council of European Union, 2012).

7.7 Transformative learning

Transformative learning is evident from the reported experiences of some of the participants of this research, but it would appear that the transformative effect is most significant during the individual's first encounter with higher education. Therefore, lecturing staff and providers of part-time mature learner supports need to be particularly cognisant of part-time mature learners who are coming to higher education for the first time. A positive learning experience is likely to transform the way in which they think which is of even greater importance than changing their level of knowledge about a particular subject, "the value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking" (Dewey, 2004: 146). Evidence from this research demonstrates how education can change an

individual's outlook on life and even their demeanour. This transformative process makes learners more empathetic and less argumentative which has positive ramifications for society more widely. Educators should be aware of, and where possible facilitate, the transformative aspect of adult education.

7.7.1 Implementation of transformative learning

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

What did I enjoy most about completing this assignment?

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

What skills did I have that contributed to this assignment?

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

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

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

7.8 Fostering lifelong learning and improving the quality of education provision

Part-time mature learners who reported a positive learning experience often also expressed an interest in undertaking further study and a number of the learners who were interviewed have already committed to taking that step. This indicates the

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

7.8.1 Implementation of fostering lifelong learning

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

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

benefits of it will become apparent and they will be more likely to promote it for their students.

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

7.9 Targeting potential learners

There were a significant number of references to midlife made by respondents to both the survey and interviews, which would indicate that the return to education by mature learners may be prompted by a broader reassessment of the self that is undertaken during the liminal phase between the adult and true self. Only 0.2% of the population in Ireland aged over 40 are engaged in education, compared with 1.5% OECD average (OECD, 2011). While the European Commission is committed to promoting high quality adult learning in Europe, there appears to be difficulty in actually making this happen, with numbers currently stagnating.   This author recommends that increased marketing activity should be undertaken to target adults of middle age.

7.9.1 Implementation of targeting potential learners

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

This author would suggest that the marketing and promotion of courses should ensure that they are appealing to this segment of society who are ideally positioned to consider

education as part of the process of establishing their true selves. Images and testimonials of part-time mature learners who fit this profile should be incorporated into marketing materials and should be represented at open days, in promotional videos and on websites and social media platforms.

7.10 Addressing external barriers

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

The other most significant external barrier for the part-time mature learner is time, and while this barrier cannot be eliminated, students can be taught skills that will allow them to maximise their time, through its effective use. This author recommends that staff should be aware of the significant external barriers that part-time mature learners face and strive to deal with the students in an understanding and helpful manner.

7.10.1 Implementation of addressing external barriers

Payment plans should be agreed with part-time students who are incapable of paying fees in one or two large payments, ideally monthly or weekly payment should be collected. While this does present an administrative difficulty, it would also represent a significant reduction in financial pressure and may provide the opportunity for education to students who otherwise would be excluded due to their financial circumstances.

The higher education institutes need to come together collectively to challenge the lack of funding and actively lobby for better supports for part-time mature students.

7.11 Creating awareness of supports for part-time mature students

The findings of this research clearly demonstrated that there was little knowledge of supports available for part-time mature learner supports, either in terms of what exactly they were, or how and where they could be accessed. Some introductions to part-time

mature learner support services were outlined at induction days, but there seemed to be a lack of additional communication. It is important to acknowledge that induction tends to be a time of information overload and uncertainty for the learner, particularly those who have not engaged with education for a long time. Therefore, it is important that additional communications are sent to learners particularly at times that they are likely to need them most. This author recommends that part-time mature learner supports should be widely and regularly advertised.

7.12 Implementation of awareness of student supports for part-time mature students

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

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

7.13 Limitations of the study

The author recognises that this research has a number of limitations. Acknowledgement of these limitations, the author believes, will ensure that the research maintains rigour and establishes additional dependability.

Due to resource and time constraints, the sample was drawn from one sector of the HE system i.e. the IoT sector. This limits generalisation to the rest of the wider community, however, the author argues that an attempt was made to minimise this generalisation by including five different IoT's from around the country. Additionally, recommendations are made to expand the research to other HEI's around the country. The sample of the current study was somewhat selective. As noted in the recommendations, the sample covers students currently enrolled in third level education and, therefore, one can argue that these are individuals who have overcome the barriers and challenges of entering higher education as a part-time mature student and, in turn, these barriers may be slightly underestimated.

As with all research concerning human subjects with voluntary participation, it was participant honesty. This research is thus limited by participant's honesty and willingness to answer all of the questions posed. The stories of the participants were limited by the nature of being human. Additionally, people change their stories as they relive them (Bruner, 2004).

The qualitative aspect of the study used 12 participants. Some may argue that 12 is a small sample thus limiting the breadth of data collected. However, a smaller number of participants is recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and is definitely related to remaining true to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Not all lifelong learning part-time students succeed in third level education and it is one of the limitations of this research that it did not include lifelong learning students who have left the system. This would be thought-provoking work for a further study. There is no organised disaggregated facts and figures available on non-completion in part-time HE, and while non-completion is not necessarily a bad thing, knowing why students withdraw or leave without completion could enable better research for the sector. By the same token, a follow-up study after graduation would provide information on the longer term outcomes for the students.

Another limitation of this study is the authors inexperience as a researcher! Lastly, the theoretical and conceptual framework of this study has some natural downfalls. Outlining situations that may preclude part-time mature student participation in higher education as barriers, may give a negative bias towards events that would otherwise be viewed positively.

Lived experiences are not always so easily recognised or neatly packaged. There may be instances when a part-time lifelong learners transition experience does not fit into these categories. It was a challenge to overcome the attraction to narrowly think of part-time mature lifelong learners' experiences based on this framework. To escape this pitfall, the author constantly reflected on other possibilities for the part-time student's experiences in order to avoid restricting their experiences to the explanation of the framework.

7.14 Future work

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

The context in which this research was undertaken was one of an economy coming out of extreme economic difficulty and fiscal constraint. Employment and employability were often quoted as being motivating factors in the part-time mature learners' decision to return to education. This heavy vocational emphasis is most likely linked to the fact that the IoT sector has historically provided large numbers of part-time and flexible programmes and maintained a high proportion of part-time mature learners as a result. It was heartening to see that for most it was a very positive experience.

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

There are a range of services and supports made available in HEIs. Typically, these are accessed by students studying on a full-time basis and tend not to be uniformly available to part-time and flexible students. A further research could focus on a whole-institution approach

to mainstreaming inclusion that recognises and values diversity, ensuring that the teaching and learning environments, student supports and approaches, campus infrastructure, systems and processes, are designed around the needs of all students, and not on any assumption of a "traditional" student population (Kelly & Padden, 2018).

While the range of services depends on the scale of the institution itself, a number of core services are typically available at HEIs. While these services are extended in theory to part-time and flexible students also, they usually function on a "normal working week" basis, with some additional opening around peak times in the academic year. In addition, the availability of all these services is subject to resources, and most have been significantly affected by the reduction in funding since 2010. The reality is, therefore, that these services are not as accessible for students who study on a part-time or flexible basis than their full-time fellow-students.

Moreover, there is a lack of data to help us better understand the profile of students participating on part-time and flexible programmes. For example, while the AHEAD report on numbers of students with disabilities studying in higher education in Ireland in 2016/17[7] shows significant increases in the numbers of students with disabilities who study part-time, and advocates part-time study as a more sustainable option for many students with disabilities, the broader datasets regarding part-time and flexible participation remain poor. This presents challenges for HEIs in ensuring a robust evidence base to deliver appropriate services and supports for part-time and flexible students. Future research in this area would be of great benefit to the sector.

Future research could also build on some of the responses from the online survey such as going into more detail on the relationship between the educational background of the students and their parental educational background (questions 9 &10). There could be a full study on this alone.

Future research could also focus on the learner as a learner regardless of their mode of study so that HEI's will not make a distinction between students on such grounds as the mode or duration of study. This study could be the beginning of HEI's treating all students equally in relation to delivery of services and supports, including to part-time/flexible students as an identified target group in the National Plan for Equity of Access.

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[7] https://ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/Rates%202016-17%20-%20ONLINE.pdf

Education has the ability to change lives and, in doing so, change societies. The power of education should not be underestimated and the opportunity should be open to all. The emerging twenty-first century context clearly demonstrates that lifelong learning, adaptability, creativity and critical thinking are fundamental requirements for everyone. Meaningful access to higher education by the full diversity of the population is essential to enabling sustainability and growth both for the individual person and for the community as a whole.

7.15 Final conclusions

This research was intended to address four main objectives; what is the experience of being a lifelong learning student in higher education? How do mature part-time students feel enabled/constrained by the general HE policy context and the particular culture of their institution? How can higher education institutions help attend to and potentially reduce the differently located challenges and better support part-time students? What kinds of issues do the real-life experiences of mature part-time HE students, and the changing policy context, present for the future of part-time study and the reality of the "lifelong learner"? The main contribution to knowledge that this research makes is an improved understanding of part-time mature learner experiences in Irish IoTs. The gap in the literature that existed on the experience of part-time mature learners in the IoT sector specifically has been addressed. Overall, the experience of this cohort was reported as being a positive one and a number of the participants expressed an intention to continue their education beyond the level that they are currently engaged in, which may indicate the potential for meaningful lifelong learning.

Whilst barriers to learning will always remain for part-time mature students, the results of this study appear to show a shift away from the more traditional barriers related to information technology and computer use. Students within this study, in the most part, were quite confident with the use of information technology and computers. Conflictingly, however, students preferred the classroom delivery of lectures to a more blended approach, which contrasts considerably with previous studies. As mentioned in the discussion, this may be as a result of the institutionalisation of part-time mature learners with previous 'chalk and talk' approaches to learning. The author is keen to recognise that the aim of this study was not to explore part-time mature student's opinions regarding traditional teaching methods versus blended or virtual learning. He recommends, however, further research be completed to garner further data on this area. He believes that it is incumbent on IoT's as institutes of higher education to challenge this possible institutionalisation and lead students to the realisation that 'blended learning' will result in a more autonomous and sophisticated learner. This, he believes, will further enhance knowledge concerning adult learners' participation in higher education.

The samples involved in this study were students currently participating in higher education. In addition, the author believes the study should be replicated in three to five years to determine if the perceptions of the participants within this study correlate with students entering higher education at that time.

This research was undertaken in a sector that has been regarded as integral to providing vocational higher education in Ireland since its foundation, and the evidence has shown that many of the participants of this research had engaged with education for that purpose. This finding is important when trying to develop policy and provide services for individuals who are seeking a vocational education. In addition to having achieved vocational educational aims, there was also evidence of transformative learning occurring. The meaning schema of some of the participants had changed and increased confidence levels were reported. This demonstrates the important role that education has in helping individuals to realise their full potential, academically and personally.

A constant finding consistently seen throughout the study was the commitment and determination that each student had for participating in higher education. Each student may have had different reasons for being in college but every single one had a goal; to gain employment, progress in their career or better themselves. It is a credit to them as individuals but also to their institute. The IoT sector is recognised by students as playing a significant part in their progression through college life with the content of the interviews filled with words like 'excellent' and 'brilliant' when describing the staff and facilities of their institute. The author set out on this journey to identify *the experiences of part-time mature students and to examine if part-time mature students feel supported in becoming 'lifelong learners' in Irish Higher Education.* It is imperative that as educators we are cognisant of how the provision of adequate and appropriate financial and childcare resources are in allowing and supporting part-time learners participate in higher education. Whilst it may initially appear costly, longer-term savings related to the quality of life for individuals and their communities needs to be factored in. It is evident from this study that, as educators, we need to explore different methods of delivery and curriculum design utilising more andragogical approaches. We need to be more cognisant of adult learners' concerns relating to academic writing and use of the VLE and implement a programme to reduce these fears. As we move towards a technological university, we need to be wary that we do not lose the unique position that the institutes hold within the community – we need to remain appealing to the student body, both young and old.

Findings from this study are somewhat surprising when we note the swing away from barriers such as age related issues and information technology related fears that the traditional authors and researchers would have previously voiced. Age is no longer seen as an issue in Irish higher educational establishments due to the changing demographics of those students that participate in higher education. Adults within the study may have issues with the institutes VLE but were in no way self-doubting when it came to using computers. Whereas other studies have identified that there is a disconnection between those who have grown up with technology, digital natives, and older people, digital immigrants, it is apparent within this study that the vast majority would see themselves as digital natives regardless of their age. It is surprising but somewhat heartening to find within the study how much of a role families and partners play in enabling adult learners return to higher education. This study shows that family involvement and interaction remains very strong within Irish society and this support is recognised and appreciated by students. Without this support, participating in education would be impossible.

The subject of part-time mature lifelong learning students participating in higher education will always be a topical and much debated issue within higher education, but the author believes that with the right approach and mind-set, an optimal service, which our students require of us, can be successfully provided. I hope this research has in some way, however small, added to the current knowledge base that is available and enhances the IoT sector as we move forward.

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

"Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young."

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APPENDICES

Survey is found at

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/parttimemature

Table : All respondents question 1

Which college are you studying at?

TOTAL **563**

- Athlone Institute of Technology
- Dundalk Institute of Technology
- Cork Institute of Technology
- Institute of Technology Carlow
- Institute of Technology Blanchardstown

171
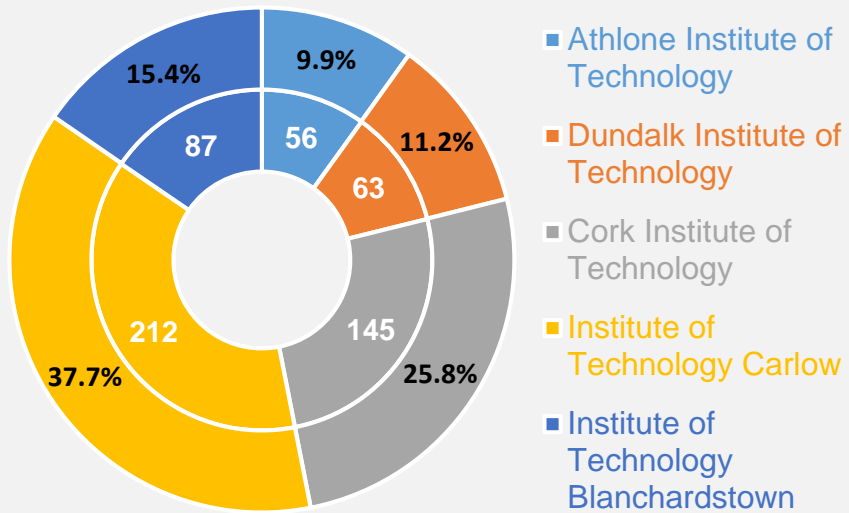
All respondents question 2

What age bracket are you in?

TOTAL **563**

- 23-29 61
- 30-44 299
- 45-59 164
- 60+ 39

10.9% | 53.1% | 29.1% | 6.9%
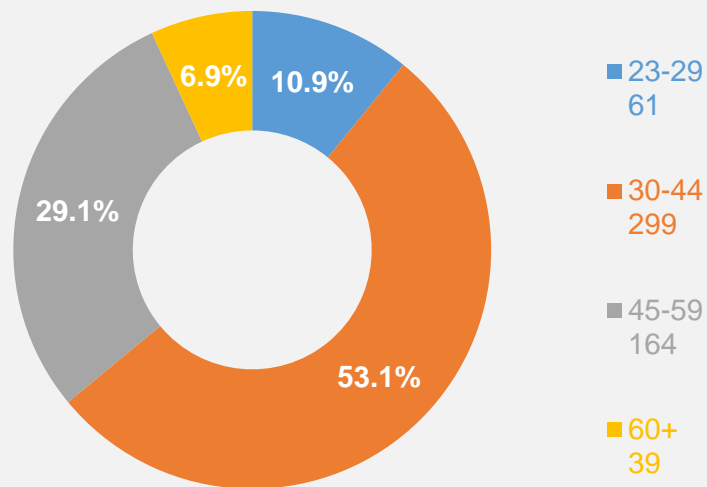
All respondents question 3

What is your gender identity?

TOTAL **563**

- Female 351
- Male 208
- Non-Binary 4

62.3% | 36.9% | 0.8%
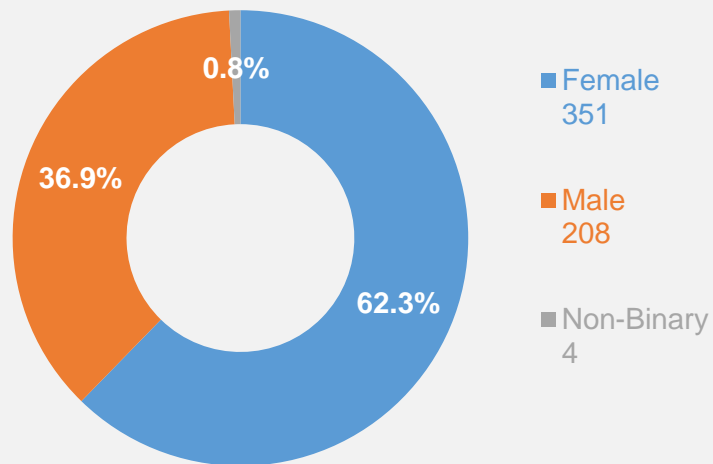
All respondents Question 4

How many dependants do you have?

TOTAL **563**

- None 187
- 1-2 249
- 3-4 112
- 5+ 15

33.2%
44.2%
19.9%
2.7%
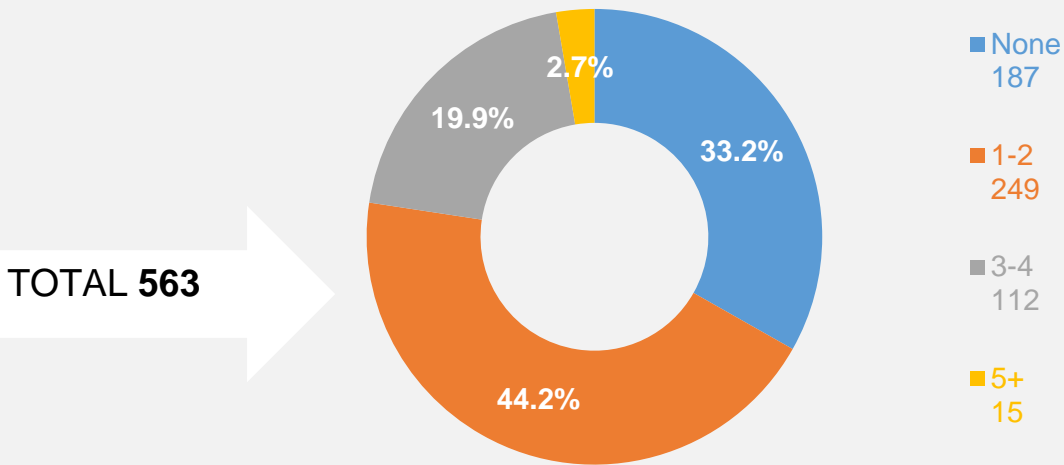
All respondents Question 5

What is your employment status?

TOTAL **563**

- In full time employment 297
- In part time employment 113
- Jobseeker 84
- Retired 69

52.8%
20.1%
14.9%
12.2%

173
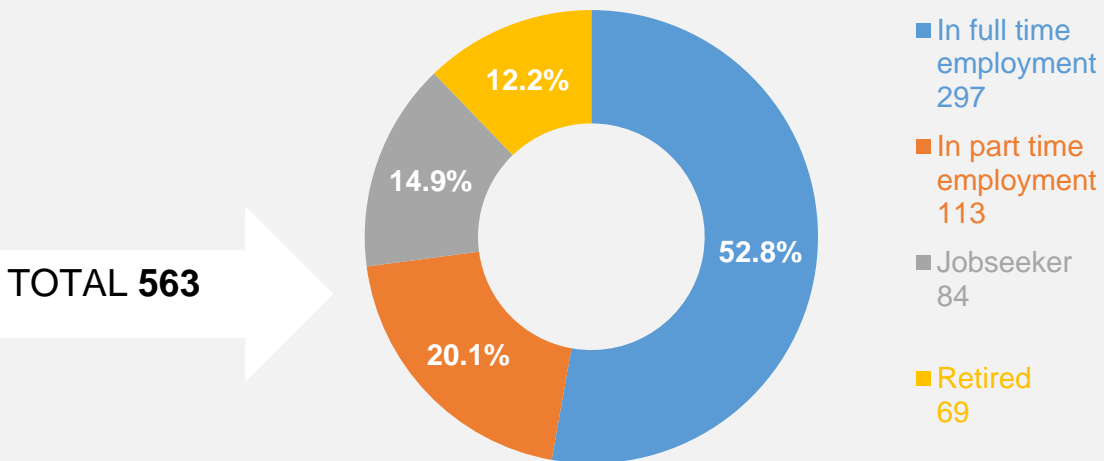
All respondents Question 6

Which of the following best describes your situation?

TOTAL **563**

- Paying your own fees – self-financing 355
- Employer paying your fees 54
- Employer paying some of your fees 36
- Springboard funded 65
- Other 53

63.1% | 9.6% | 6.4% | 11.5% | 9.4%
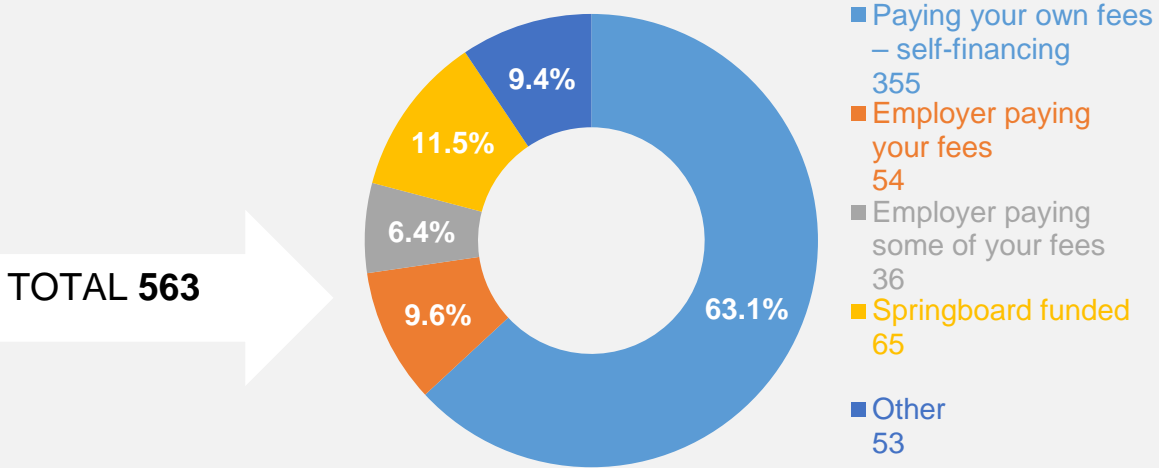
Table : All respondents Question 7

At what age did you finish primary/secondary school?

TOTAL **563**

- 0-10 0
- 11-15 125
- 16-20 438

0.0% | 22.2% | 77.8%
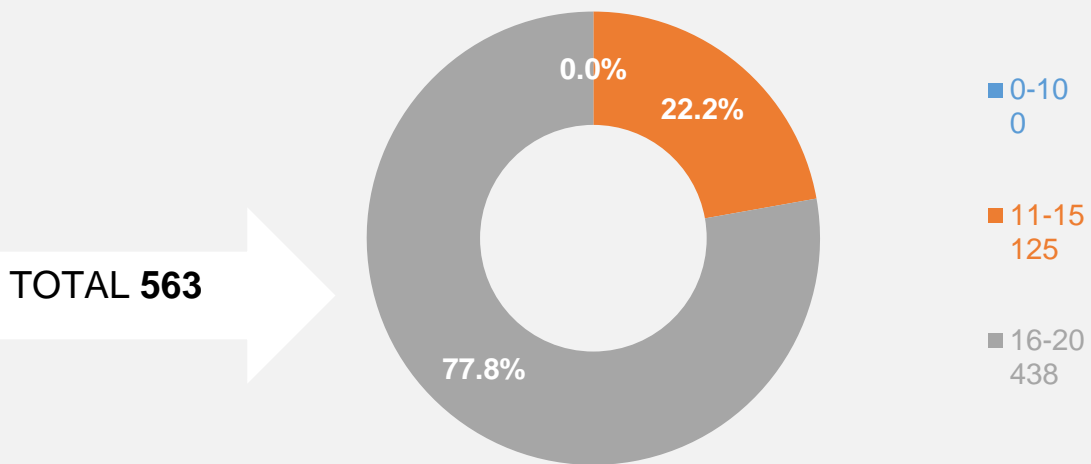
Table : All respondents question 8

Please tick, which, if any, of the second level programmes below you completed

TOTAL **563**

- Leaving Certificate 309
- A Levels 29
- Leaving Certificate Applied 19
- Junior Certificate 46
- Intermediate Certificate 63
- Other 97

54.9%
17.3%
11.2%
8.2%
3.3%
5.1%

Table : All respondents question 9

What (currently) is your highest level of Education?

TOTAL **563**

- Primary School 34
- Group/Inter/Junior Certificate 18
- Apprenticeship 59
- Leaving Certificate 37
- Further Education i.e. FETAC/QQI 183
- Third Level Higher Certificate 101
- Third Level Degree 81
- Masters or Ph.D 37
- Other 13

6.0%
3.2%
10.5%
6.6%
32.5%
17.9%
14.4%
6.6%
2.3%
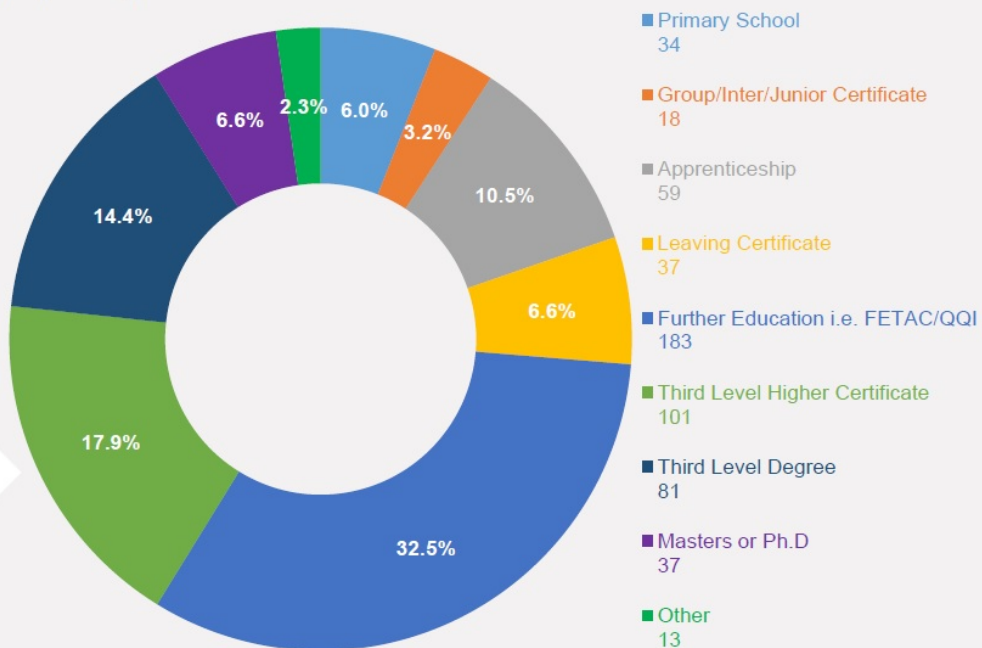
What was your parent(s)/guardians highest level of Education?
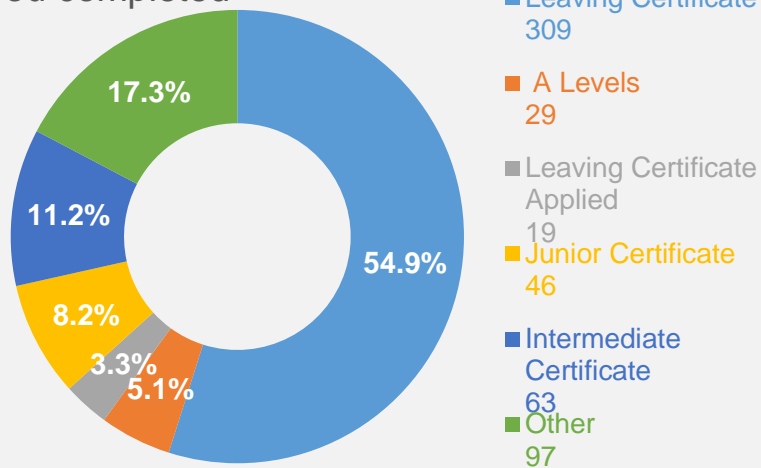
- Primary School 178
- Group/Inter/Junior Certificate 149
- Apprenticeship 54
- Leaving Certificate 79
- Further Education i.e. FETAC/QQI 21
- Higher Certificate 0
- Third Level Degree 42
- Masters or Ph.D 12
- Don't know 20
- Other 8

31.6%
26.5%
9.6%
14.0%
3.7%
0.0%
7.4%
2.2%
3.6%
1.4%
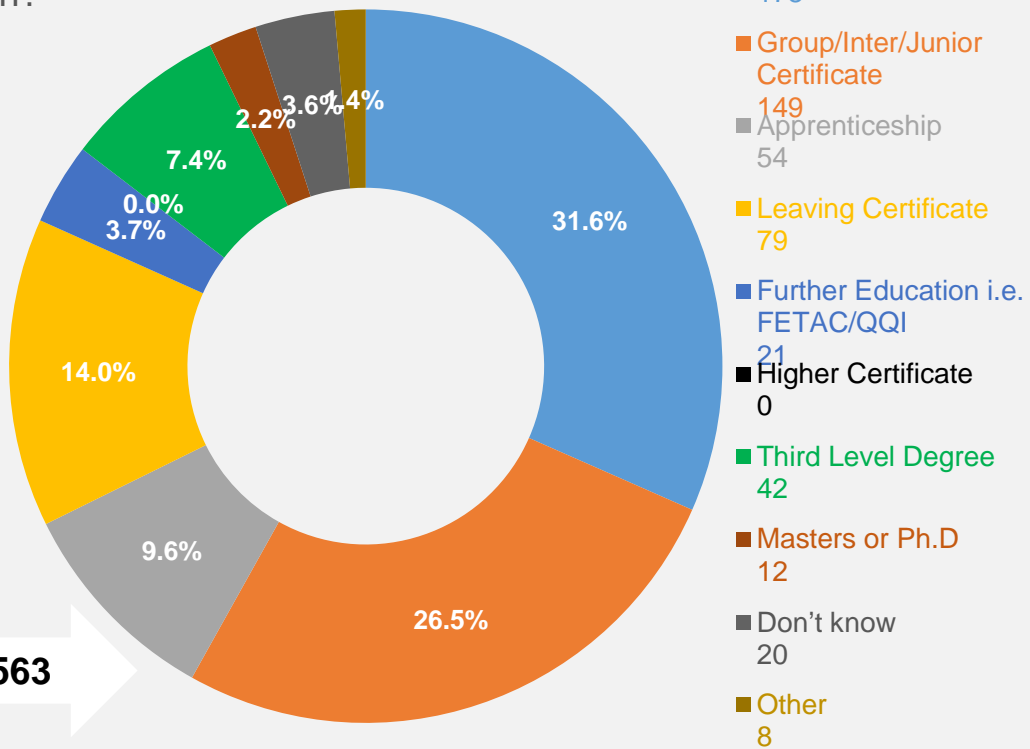
TOTAL **563**

What distance do you have to travel to get to college?
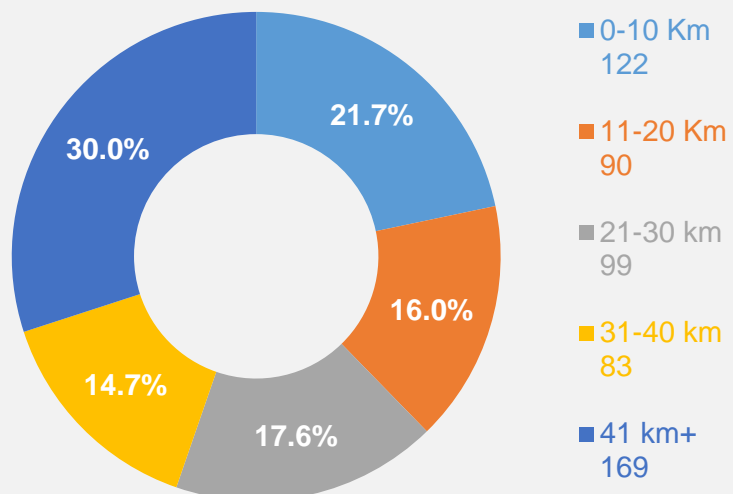
- 0-10 Km 122
- 11-20 Km 90
- 21-30 km 99
- 31-40 km 83
- 41 km+ 169

21.7%
16.0%
17.6%
14.7%
30.0%

TOTAL **563**

What discipline area are you studying?

TOTAL **563**

Legend:
- Business, Administration and Law — 131
- Services — 20
- Engineering/Manufacturing & Construction — 74
- Arts & Humanities — 82
- Social Sciences/Journalism — 104
- Education — 45
- Health & Welfare — 77
- ICT/Computing — 23
- Agriculture/Forestry/Fisheries/Veterinary — 0
- Other — 7

Pie chart values: 23.2%, 3.6%, 13.1%, 14.6%, 18.5%, 8.0%, 13.7%, 4.1%, 0.0%, 1.2%
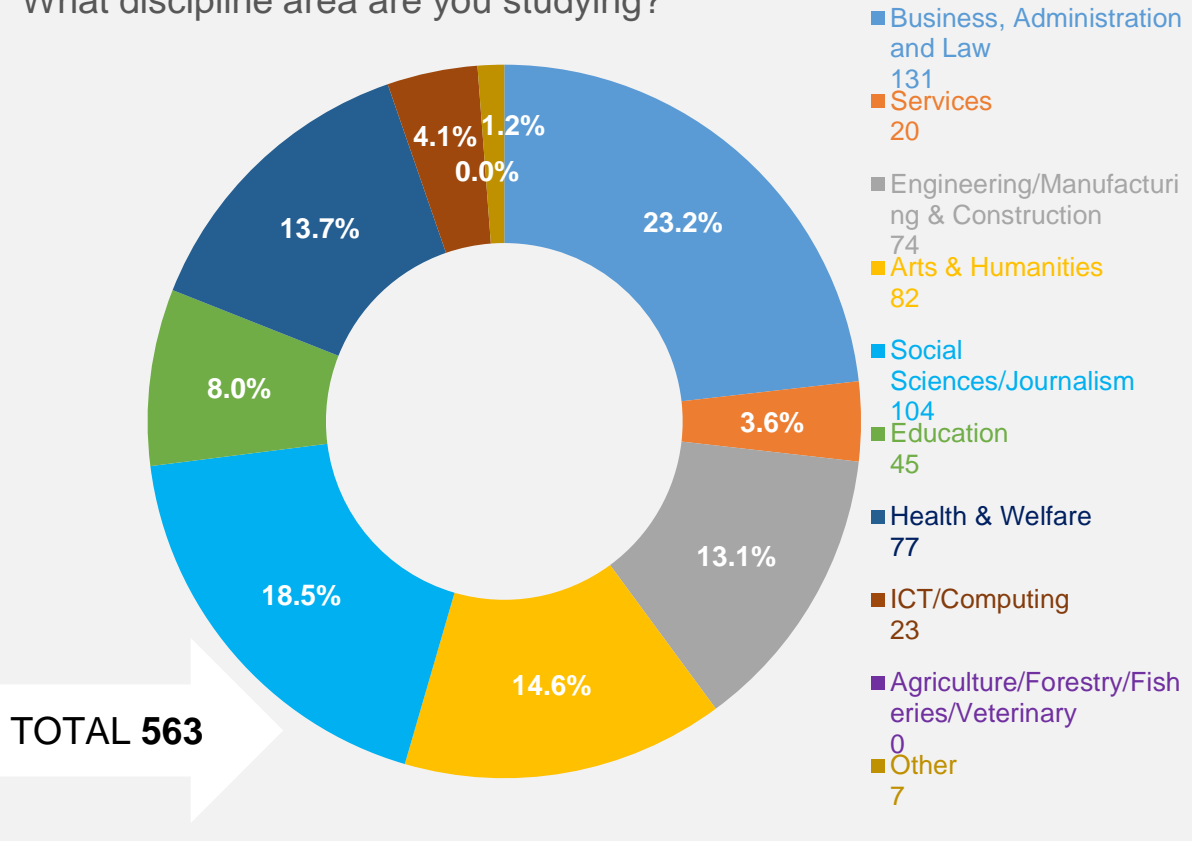
All respondents question 13

How did you hear about your course?
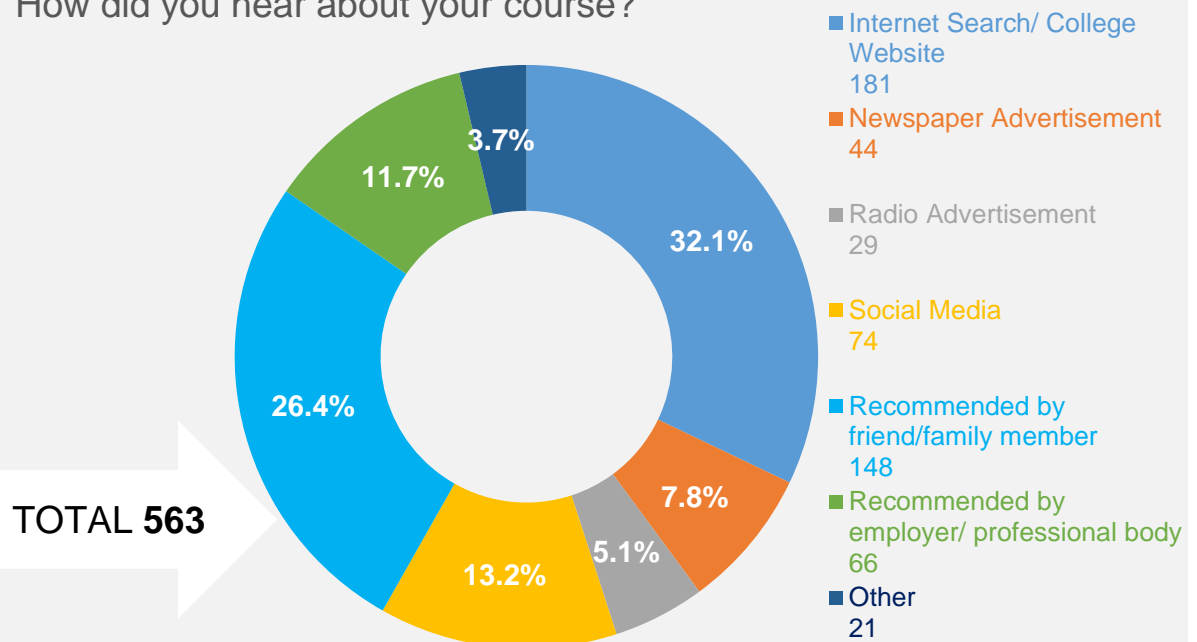
TOTAL **563**

Legend:
- Internet Search/ College Website — 181
- Newspaper Advertisement — 44
- Radio Advertisement — 29
- Social Media — 74
- Recommended by friend/family member — 148
- Recommended by employer/ professional body — 66
- Other — 21

Chart percentages:
- 32.1%
- 7.8%
- 5.1%
- 13.2%
- 26.4%
- 11.7%
- 3.7%

To what extent (if any) are the following issues of concern to you as a part-time student?

■Strongly agree ■Agree ■Neither agree nor disagree ■Disagree ■Strongly disagree

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Integration with other learners	44	71	289	63	96
Childcare issues	265	100	23	74	101
Personal relationships	129	86	201	84	63
Time pressure	307	214	30	10	2
Financial issues	366	121	12	51	13
Ability to succeed	265	197	10	58	33
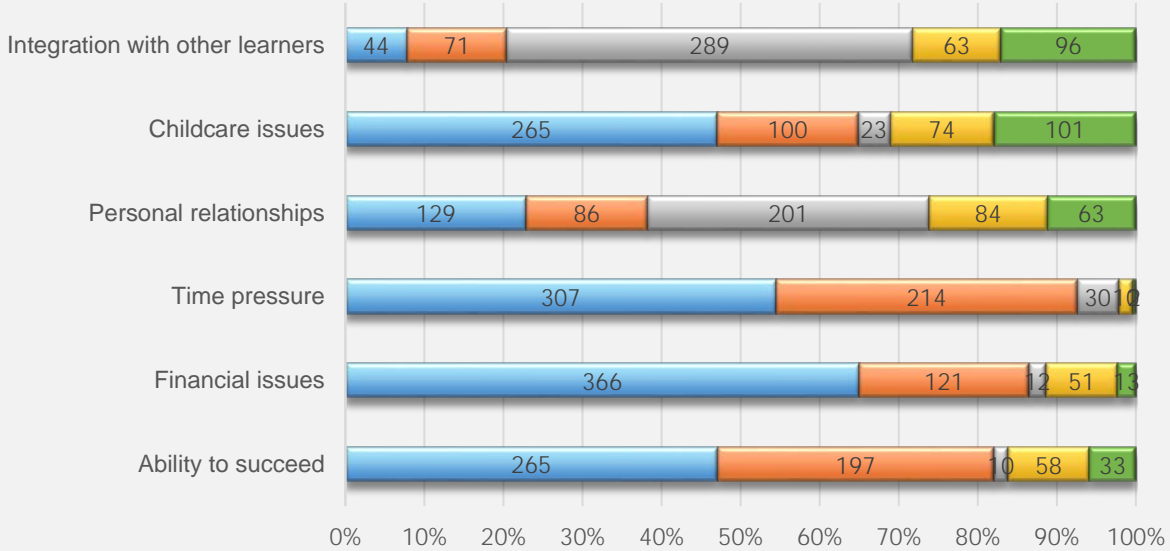
	Ability to succeed	Financial issues	Time pressure	Personal relationships	Childcare issues	Integration with other learners
■Strongly agree	265	366	307	129	265	44
■Agree	197	121	214	86	100	71
■Neither agree nor disagree	10	12	30	201	23	289
■Disagree	58	51	10	84	74	63
■Strongly disagree	33	13	2	63	101	96

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INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Title of the study

Lifelong Learning as a Transformative Endeavour: **How do part-time mature learners make sense of barriers and opportunities in Higher Education?**

The Researcher

Joseph Collins – I am a PhD student at Lancaster University. I am studying on a part-time basis as I work full-time as Head of Faculty of Lifelong Learning at the Institute of Technology Carlow.

My contact details are j.collins5@lancaster.ac.uk

The Supervisor of my Research is

Dr. Kirsty Finn

Email: k.finn1@lancaster.ac.uk

Research Abstract

This research is being conducted by Joseph Collins as part of his studies for a Ph.D. at Lancaster University. The purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of part-time mature student's experiences of part-time higher education. The research will also examine government policy, and how it has informed higher education institutional practices as it relates to part-time students. It would not be possible to understand student's experiences without situating it within the changing context that is Higher Education.

This case study involves a select number of students within particular higher education institutions. It involves use of an online survey and individual interviews with part-time mature students. Interviews will be semi-structured, where a series of key themes specific to studying part-time in higher education will be discussed. In the interest of being able to facilitate the discussion, interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed at a later stage. Prior to interviews commencing, I will talk through the research questions, how the interview will be conducted and answer students queries about the interview process. Interviews will focus on part-time mature student's experiences of part-time higher education.

.

What is required if you decide to participate in the research?
You agree to be *interviewed, the outline of this is detailed below.*
You are free to change your mind and withdraw from the research at any time, even after the interview. During the interview you do no need to answer a question if you do not want to.

Anonymity
In any reports or publications resulting from this study your identity will remain anonymous. Your name will not be disclosed and will not be used.

Outline of the interview:
1. You will be given the questions in advance of the interview (at least 1 week)
2. I will give you this consent form to sign in advance of the interview (at least 1 week). At this time if there are any questions you will be free to ask me.
3. You are also free to ask me questions after you have signed the consent form and before the interview starts.
4. The interview will take place at any public venue of your choice.
5. There will be approximately 15 questions.
6. It will take approximately between 45 minutes for the interview.
7. I will record the interview and tell you when I start it.
8. I will transcribe (type up) the interview and I will send it to you.
9. You can comment, amend or withdraw your transcript from the research at any time.
10. If you stated that you would like to learn something specific in this research project, I will incorporate that into the research plan.

Confidentiality of data –who will have access to the data?
I will ensure confidentiality of the data. Written data will be encrypted* and stored on my own personal password protected laptop. Audio data will be stored on a hard drive which will be secure. No names will be used in the data, 'research names' will be used
*Encrypted data is data which has been changed into a secret code and is one of the most reliable ways to secure data.

What if I decide to withdraw from the research?
Any research participant is free to withdraw from the study at any time up until the publication of the thesis. If you wish to withdraw please contact the researcher directly, no questions will be asked and there is no pressure to continue with the research or give a reason for withdrawing. It is essential that participants act in a voluntary capacity.

The interview process - potential issues raised
Please note that the interview is designed to find out your views on the research topic. It is not a form of counselling and if issues arise that need professional advice the researcher will provide referral information to you

Consent Form

Study Title:

I am asking you would you like to take part in a research project ***Lifelong Learning as a Transformative Endeavour:*** **How do part-time mature learners make sense of barriers and opportunities in Higher Education?**

Before you consent to participating in the study we ask that you read the participant information sheet and mark each box below with your initials if you agree. If you have any questions or queries before signing the consent form, please speak to Joseph Collins.

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet and fully understand what is expected of me within this study.

2. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask any questions and to have them answered.

3. I understand that my interview will be audio recorded and then made into an anonymised written transcript.

4. I understand that audio recordings will be kept until the research project has been examined.

5. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my medical care or legal rights being affected.

6. I understand that once my data have been anonymised and incorporated into themes, it might not be possible for it to be withdrawn, though every attempt will be made to extract my data, up to the point of publication.

7. I understand that the information from my interview will be pooled with other participants' responses, anonymised and may be published,

8. I consent to information and quotations from my interview being used in reports, conferences and training events.

9. I understand that any information I give will remain strictly confidential and anonymous unless it is thought that there is a risk of harm to myself or others, in which case the principal investigator will/may need to share this information with his/her research supervisor.

10. I consent to Lancaster University keeping written transcriptions of the interview for 10 years after the study has finished.

11. I consent to take part in the above study.

Please initial each statement

Name of Participant_____

Signature_____

Date _____

Name of Researcher _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Questions

1. Why did you decide to become a part-time student in Higher Education?

2. Was this a difficult decision to make? Why?

3. How did you feel about it at that time?

4. How do you feel about it now?

5. What was your experience of school – primary/secondary?

6. Has your experience of school affected your life? Positive/Negative? Family/Friends?

7. What is the best part of being a part-time learner?

8. What is the worst part of being a part-time mature learner?

9. Are part-time mature students being properly supported by colleges? Why?

10. Are part-time mature students being properly supported by the state? Why?

11. How do you find the academic demands – study, assignments, exams, time management, and family commitments?

12. What do you hope to do when you finish your course of study?

13. What advice would you give to a family member/friend thinking of returning to college as a part-time mature learner?

14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences of being a part-time mature student?

15. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you.

1. Read all protocols to acquire a feeling for them.

2. Review each protocol and extract significant statements.

3. Spell out the meaning of each significant statement i.e. formulate meanings.

4. Organise the formulated meanings into cluster of themes. Refer these clusters back to the original protocols to validate them. Note discrepancies among or between the various clusters, avoiding the temptation of ignoring data or themes that do not fit.

5. Integrate results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.

6. Formulate an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study in as unequivocal a statement of identification as possible.

7. Ask participants about the findings thus far as a final validating step.