

**From Disorientation to Reintegration: An Exploratory  
Investigation of Mature Students' Engagement in Transformative  
Learning**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of  
Ph.D. in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and  
Enhancement**

**by**

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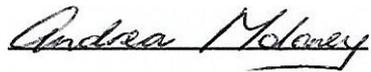
**to**

**University of Lancaster, December 2018**

## Declaration

I declare that the thesis is my own work, has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere and that the word length conforms to the permitted maximum.

Signed

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrea Moloney". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Andrea Moloney

## Dedication

**To Alice and Eva, for always making me smile.**

*Never stop dreaming,*

*Never stop believing,*

*Never give up,*

*Never stop trying, and*

*Never stop learning.*

*(Roy T. Bennett, The Light in the Heart).*

## **Abstract**

Mezirow describes transformative learning, which originates with the study of adults in the U.S. returning to full-time higher education, as learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change. This thesis explores the level of engagement with transformative learning of full-time mature students at three Irish Institutes of Technology. An extensive review of higher education, learning theory and transformative learning literatures along with an exploration of the Head, Heart and Hands (3H) Model of transformative learning, provide the theoretical framework for this research while highlighting the limited exploration of transformative learning in an Irish higher education research context. Mezirow's 10 phases of transformative learning are traced, utilising a mixed methods research design, through the narratives of full-time mature students, using reflective accounts and photo elicitation interviews. A number of over-arching issues are identified including triggers of transformative learning, such as unemployment, in addition to enablers, including government funding and challenges of such experiences, for example, self-doubt. Significant evidence of transformative learning is found in this research, and the implications of this for mature students, including a necessity for colleges to increase their focus on the specific needs of mature students, are examined. The integration of the theoretical foundations and empirical findings leads to a key conclusion, that the concept of transformative learning cannot be over-simplified into the achievement of a series of ten phases. This resulted in an expansion of the 3Hs to a 4H Model, and the development of a multi-theory full-time mature student learning model. Final conclusions are presented illustrating the complexity of full-time mature student learning. A range of recommendations are made including a deeper appreciation of the ways mature students learn and increasing support for mature students in their transition to full-time higher education.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Context**

### **1.1 Introduction: More studies on mature students' experiences needed**

This doctoral thesis examines the transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students in Ireland who are major participants of lifelong learning and who, to date, have been largely ignored in the literature on adult learning (Moran, 2015).

The primary aim of this research is to undertake an exploratory investigation of the transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students at three Irish Institutes of Technology.

It can certainly be observed that governments have considered mature students as important participants in education and society: at both national and European levels, governments have developed strategies to attempt to expand the number of mature students participating in further and higher level education (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; European Commission, 2013). It should be noted, however, that there is a risk that concentrating solely on increasing numbers will do little to enhance the overall educational experiences of mature students. Indeed, "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, p.46).

A key position of this thesis is that mature students have different learning needs compared to those of traditional school-leavers, as argued by many authors (Hart, 2001; Lynch and Smith, 2006; Mezirow, 2000, Kelly, 2013). As part of their overall academic experience, mature students go through different phases of transformation relating to their past and present educational, personal, and social experiences. They appreciate that they are facing into a new experience and must learn to adjust and cope with the challenges presented to them, including dealing with returning to study, integration and involvement, and finance (Fleming, 2014). All the while they are expected to pursue their ambitions despite these challenges, and take advantage of the opportunities presented to them including career advancement (Pearce, 2014). Some challenges represent significant obstacles, in particular work-life balance, financial pressures and lack of confidence (Grabov, 1997) and these frequently lead to frustration within their academic and/or social lives (Pilling-Cormick, 1997). This thesis is therefore interested in the experiences of mature students in higher education and what could be done to enhance them.

## **1.2 Background: The Knowledge and Research Gap**

This main goal of this thesis is an in-depth examination of the process of transformative learning with regards to mature students. As described by Fleming (2017), "transformative learning is the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action"(pp. 7-8). Following on from this definition, this research will explore the theory of transformative learning and its application to the experiences of a number of mature students currently studying in Irish Institutes of Technology.

A significant part of the current literature on mature students' transformative learning experiences investigates these students in relation to their decision to return to part-time education or training. However, little literature focuses on the experiences of full-time mature students (e.g. Morrissey, 1990; O'Brien, Keogh and Neenan, 2009) and no such literature is centred round full-time mature students in Ireland, and in particular, the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) (Moran, 2015). This is an important context for studying mature students and their experiences, as the Institutes of Technology strategy aims to allocate 20% of their total full-time student cohort places to mature students (Moran, 2015). The definition of a mature student which applies to this research is in the Irish Government Statutory Instruments Student Grant Scheme 2018. Section 13.4 of this document defines a mature student as a student who on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January –

- (a) in the year of entry for the first time to an approved post leaving certificate course;
- (b) in the year of entry for the first time to an approved higher education course (other than a course known for the time being as a post leaving certificate course); or
- (c) in the year of re-entry to an approved course, is at least 23 years old (pp.11-12).

However, this definition lacks clarity and does not specify that the mature student group of interest in this research are those who have applied through the Central Applications Office (CAO), rather than by direct application or through other mechanisms. Therefore, each of the constituent colleges of this research has identified their own specific definitions of mature students, which reflect the core elements of the statutory definition in a more concise manner.

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology describes mature students as those who are “aged 23 or over on the 1st January in the year of entry to an undergraduate course” (<https://www.gmit.ie/sites/default/files/public/access-office/docs/mature-student-handbook.pdf>).

Letterkenny Institute of Technology, on their dedicated webpages on applying for full-time undergraduate courses as a mature applicant, identify mature students as “those who are over 23 by 1 January in the proposed year of entry.” (<https://www.lyit.ie/Study-at-LYIT/How-to-Apply-for-Full-time-Undergraduate-Courses/CAO-Mature-Applicant>).

Institute of Technology, Sligo (I.T. Sligo), the third participant college in this research specifies that mature students must apply through the CAO and defines a mature student as “someone who is aged 23 or older on January 1<sup>st</sup> of the calendar year of application to third level education.” ([www.itsligo.ie](http://www.itsligo.ie)).

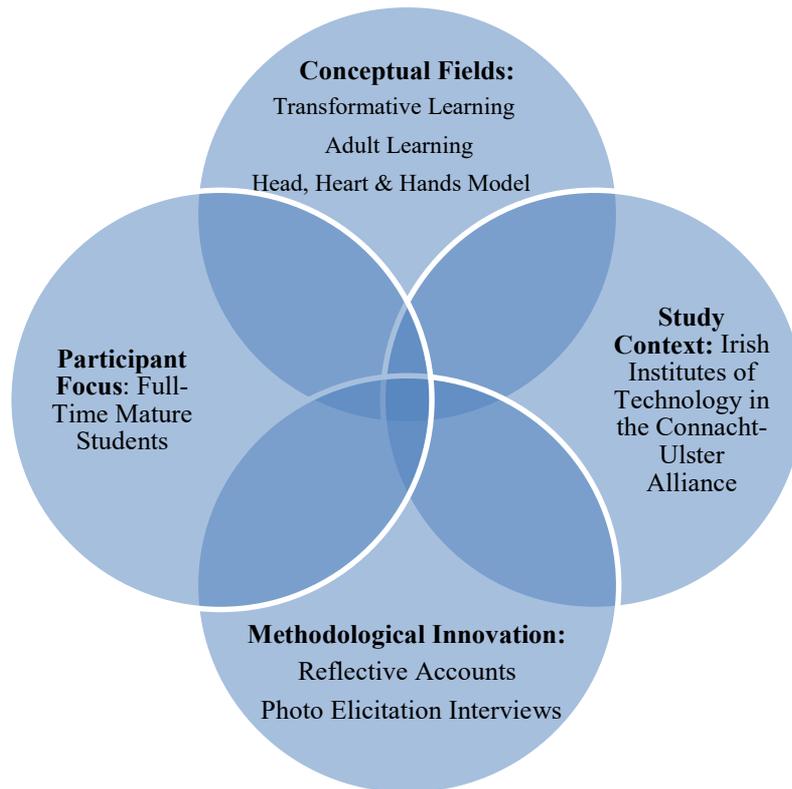
While the wording of each of these definitions varies slightly, there is clearly a focus on full-time study, application through the CAO and the importance of the applicant being at least 23 years old on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of their year of entry to higher education in each of these colleges.

Full-time mature students comprise a significant proportion of the undergraduate student population. For example, in the three participant colleges of this research, there is a target set to have mature students representing 20% of the full-time undergraduate student cohort. Yet the learning experiences of this group are largely ignored in the literature in an Irish context (Moran, 2015). This exploratory study fills this research gap by focusing on full-time mature students and thereby makes a contribution to existing research on the experiences and needs of mature students more widely. The study is contextual to Irish Higher Education and, in particular, Institutes of Technology.

The application of transformative learning theory among mature students is explored here in a literature review of the key researchers in the areas of adult learning and transformative learning (see, for example, Boyd & Meyers, 1988; Brookfield, 2000; Cranton, 1994; Fleming, 2014a). The concept of transformation is further uniquely investigated in this research using the Head, Heart and Hands Model (Singleton, 2015). This model illustrates the three prerequisite elements of transformative learning namely thinking, feeling and doing.

This study is situated at three Institutes of Technology in Ireland. These colleges are the current constituent members of the proposed Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA). The alliance involves the merging of three third-level academic institutions in Ireland, namely Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), Sligo Institute of Technology (IT, Sligo) and Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT). The purposes of this alliance are to encourage the streamlining of service offerings across the institutions and ultimately to achieve the status of a University of Technology (<http://cualliance.ie/>). This research engages with full-time mature students within these particular colleges and provides a unique contribution of this research in terms of both theory and methods. In terms of theory, the thesis combines the perspectives of transformative learning and adult learning theories with the Hand, Heart and Hands model of Transformative Learning, which shows its holistic nature. In relation to methods, the data on the transformative learning experiences of these students is gathered using a combination of mature student reflective accounts and photo elicitation interviews with students. These involve full-time mature students verbally expressing and explaining their views as distinct from merely choosing from a list of pre-defined options without supplying any further explanations for their choices and spontaneous thinking. The combination of conceptual fields, participant focus, study context and methodological innovation of this research result in a unique contribution to knowledge in terms of both theory and practice in exploring the transformative learning experiences of mature students within the CUA, as illustrated in Figure 1.1 below.

**Figure 1.1 Contributions to Knowledge**



### **1.2.1 Personal Motivation for Undertaking this Research**

As a lecturer with 20 years' experience in the Irish third-level education sector, and as a doctoral student of *Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement*, in undertaking this research, I aimed to investigate mature students' perceptions, with a view to better understanding their needs. I view this thesis as a way to further advance my own professional development and enhance my lecturing skills when interacting with mature students with whom I interact regularly. In addition, my research has the potential to influence future higher education strategies and practice in my own workplace as well as in other third-level academic institutions both in Ireland and beyond.

Having professionally engaged with mature students on both full-time and part-time courses, as well as traditional full-time school-leaver students, I noticed contrasts in the ways mature students engaged in learning compared to their school-leaver classmates. Frequently, mature students in full-time education seem to find it challenging to interact with their school-leaver classmates and have more difficulties in their work/life balance adjustments than their younger

classmates. It might be unclear what added dimension to the learning experience in the classroom, mature students bring both to their younger peers and other mature students. However, it is worth stating these, as their participation as more experienced learners has advantages for all, as will be shown in the results of this research.

### **1.3 Research Scope, Questions and Limitations**

The following section examines the scope of the research as well as identifying the research questions being answered. Then the objectives and limitations relating to this research are explored.

#### ***Research Scope***

This research focuses on the mature students' transformative learning experiences within the three colleges of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance, which were described using innovative data collection techniques, with the primary data having been collected from full-time mature students from January to March, 2017. This data informs other academic institutions, within the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland. It also has an application in other Irish academic institutions as well as in an international context. The generalisability of the study is derived at an intersection of the experiences of others working with mature students and the results of this study, which is designed to provide greater insights into full-time mature students' transformative learning experiences.

#### ***Research Questions***

The research questions identified in this chapter reflect the questions that are to be answered in the thesis as a whole.

***Primary Research Question:*** What are the experiences of mature students at three Irish institutes of technology with regards to transformative aspects of their learning?

This involves a number of sub-questions:

1. What are the triggers that lead to transformative experiences among mature students?
2. What enables such experiences?
3. What creates obstacles to having such experiences?

4. How does the Head, Heart and Hands model of transformative learning help to define and conceptualise mature students' experiences?
5. What are the implications of the findings for higher education practice with regards to mature students, to support an improvement of mature students' transformative learning experiences?

### ***Research Limitations***

A preliminary review of the literature on transformative and other learning theories for this research has identified a number of limitations that impact this research. These include failure to ground research in primary sources, an over-reliance on literature reviews of transformative learning, lack of more substantial critique of original research, and a lack of engagement with transformative learning theory by many European adult education researchers, aside from a small number of UK, US and Irish-based researchers (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Another limitation of this research study is its narrow context. This comes from the fact that it was conducted with a sample population of full-time mature students from the three Irish institutes of technology which currently comprise the Connacht-Ulster Alliance. Therefore, I cannot draw conclusions about factors that promote transformative learning experiences for mature students in other Irish or foreign academic institutions. Furthermore, the research was limited to full-time mature students, rather than traditional school-leavers or part-time mature students, but this was done to gain insights into the experiences of this particular group. Mixed research methods are used in this research. A key limitation of such methods is that the quality of the data collected is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher to interpret it, and it is therefore, more easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies. This is the case in all predominantly qualitative research and I acknowledge it. Having identified these limitations, every effort has been made to minimise their impact on this research.

### **1.4 Study Context: Further Information**

There is now a requirement for academic institutions to legitimise their activities and demonstrate their value in the market. This section provides an overview of the broad context in which this research on mature students' experiences of transformative learning is positioned.

The Irish economy enjoyed a period of sustained and exceptional economic growth from 1994 until 2007. Initially, this was driven by the expansion of world trade and a significant rise in

world market share for Irish exports due to the competitive nature of the Irish tradable sector. This resulted in a rapid rise in living standards (Bergin et al., 2011). In the latter years of this period of prosperity, economic growth was assisted by high levels of foreign direct investment, low corporate tax rates and by the fact of being an English-speaking country (Eurostat, 2012). This period of economic prosperity was characterised by high levels of employment. As a result, the numbers of full-time mature students declined, as the state of the economy is inversely related to the numbers of full-time mature students, since unemployment was not a significant motivating factor for them in their decision to return to education (Eurostat, 2012).

However, by 2007, the Irish economy had become dangerously dependent on the construction and real estate sectors as sources of economic growth and tax revenue. When the real estate price bubble burst, the country experienced a deep banking crisis, increased unemployment and fall in earnings generated from the labour market (Watson & Maître, 2013). The contraction in national output was unprecedented and this resulted in a fiscal crisis that obliged the country to accept a “bail out” from the EU and the IMF.

The rapid deterioration in the labour market, alongside stringent austerity measures implemented to support the public finances had a widespread impact on peoples’ lives (O’Connell, 2012), and this continues to the present. As a result of the economic downturn, during the period in which this research was undertaken, there has been a notably higher level of mature student participation in full-time higher education, due to continuing high levels of unemployment and economic instability and uncertainty. This economic uncertainty has impacted countries on a global scale, which in turn, has resulted in a reduction in the funding allocation to higher education institutions in Ireland and abroad (Eurostat, 2012).

The Higher Education Authority (HEA), which is the external body in charge of maintaining the standards of third-level education in Ireland, is also in charge of budgetary allocations. Governments and global entities, for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) are facilitating a value for money focus for academic institutions at a European level. At the same time, Biesta (2006) contends that measuring educational outcomes needs to be handled with care where finances are affected. Decision-makers at government level are making decisions and changes to higher education institutions in Ireland without meeting with the service providers at all levels in the relevant colleges. Many of these appear to have a financial basis rather than being focused on student benefits (Jones, 2015). Thus, while education "is a set of processes and outcomes that are

defined qualitatively...it could be judged unfortunately that the quantitative aspects of education have become the main focus of attention in recent years for policy makers" (Education for All, 2005, pp.28-29).

While a requirement for change within the broader third-level education sector is recognised by the Department of Education and Skills, they point out that "the challenges of scale and the rationale for change in the institutes of technology are more immediate" (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.101). The main change they allude to is making "a stronger link between student numbers and funding allocations" (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 101). This clear necessity to justify the monetary structure of the education sector is chief among the issues of implementing changes within the sector. This focus has significant implications for full-time mature student learning.

The Institutes of Technology's focus is on teaching and learning that enhances employability of graduates and this is of great value to full-time mature students ([www.gmit.ie](http://www.gmit.ie)). Any change that would enhance the quality and extent of research being carried out in the IoT sector ought not to interfere with the existing teaching and learning experience, but rather improve it.

#### ***1.4.1 Structure of the Higher Education Sector in Ireland***

At present there are thirty-nine higher education establishments in Ireland in receipt of public funding of over €1.5 billion every year. In addition to Universities and Institutes of Technology, 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. These colleges collectively serve approximately 200,000 students (<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/>).

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the statutory planning and development body for higher education and research in Ireland. The HEA has wide advisory powers throughout the whole of the third-level education sector. In addition, it is the funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology and other designated higher education institutions.

The Universities Act, 1997 sets out the objects and functions of a university, the structure and role of governing bodies, staffing arrangements, composition and role of academic councils and sections relating to property, finance and reporting.

The Institutes of Technology Act, 2006, creates a similar relationship between the institutes and the HEA as that between the HEA and the universities. It provides for greater institutional autonomy, improved governance and a statutory guarantee of academic freedom for the Institutes of Technology.

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, which was launched in 2011, will see the transformation of Ireland's higher education sector over the next two decades. Endorsed by Government as the future blueprint for the sector, the Strategy sets out changes for the sector that are aimed at providing for: a more flexible system, with a greater choice of provision and modes of learning for an increasingly diverse cohort of students; improvements in the quality of the student experience, the quality of teaching and learning and the relevance of learning outcomes; and ensuring that higher education connects more effectively with wider social, economic and enterprise needs through its staff, the quality of its graduates, the relevance of its programmes, the quality of its research and its ability to translate that into high value jobs and real benefits for society.

In May 2013 the Minister for Education and Skills announced a major re-organisation of the country's higher education sector. This announcement followed recommendations made by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on system reconfiguration, inter-institutional collaboration and system governance in Irish higher education.

A new system performance framework is being put in place by the HEA based on key system objectives and indicators noted by Government. In the next stage of implementation of the framework the HEA will enter into a set of individual institutional performance agreements with higher education institutions which will reflect each institution's contribution as part of a new higher education system designed to respond to the needs of Ireland's economy and wider society in the coming years. A key element in the overall approach will be the implementation of performance funding in the sector. This plan will also result in the formation of clusters of colleges, such as the Connacht-Ulster Alliance being studied in this research, with the aim of creating Technological Universities. The first of these Technological University, Dublin came into existence in January 2019 (<https://www.tu4dublin.ie/>).

The remaining Institutes of Technology, which are situated across the Republic of Ireland are under the auspices of Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI). This research focuses on three of these colleges: Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), Institute of Technology, Sligo

(IT, Sligo) and Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), which represent the current constituent colleges of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance, a strategic partnership which was formed with the ultimate aim of achieving joint University of Technology status for the colleges involved. The following section explores the characteristics of these colleges, as they relate to the Connacht-Ulster Alliance.

### **1.5 Characteristics of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance**

The Connacht-Ulster Alliance is a strategic partnership involving three Institutes of Technology in the Connacht-Ulster region of Ireland:

- Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)
- Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)
- Institute of Technology, Sligo (IT, Sligo)

This alliance was formally launched and approved by each college's Governing Body with the support of their Academic Council. A set of guiding principles was also agreed between the three colleges' Presidents that provide a framework for engagement. At this time, GMIT, LYIT and IT, Sligo are collaborating and working towards achieving the criteria required to become a technological university ([www.cua.ie](http://www.cua.ie)).

The following section profiles each of the constituent colleges of the CUA, all of which have significant mature student populations.

#### ***Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)***

GMIT was founded in 1972 as Regional Technical College (RTC) Galway and in 1997 the college was renamed Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT). The college has a number of campuses in Galway and Mayo which provide courses in Business, Engineering, Science & Computing, Tourism, Hotel Management, Creative Arts & Media, Furniture Design & Technology, Nursing, Sports Science and Agriculture. Each of these Schools caters to part-time students, as well as full-time traditional school leavers and mature students. GMIT has a total student population of 6,585 full-time students across all of its campuses with 234 of these categorised as full-time mature students ([www.gmit.ie](http://www.gmit.ie)).

### ***Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)***

LYIT was founded in 1971. It was formerly known as Regional Technical College, Letterkenny. The institute offers courses in Business, Law, Computing, Engineering, Nursing, Veterinary Nursing, Design and Science. With a student population of 5,000, LYIT currently has approximately 135 full-time mature students (www.lyit.ie).

### ***Institute of Technology, Sligo (IT, Sligo)***

I.T., Sligo opened in 1970 as a Regional Technical College and adopted its present name in May 1997. The college currently has three Schools - the School of Business & Social Science, the School of Engineering & Design and the School of Science. It offers a similar suite of courses to the other two colleges in the CUA. Currently the college has a student population of approximately 4,000 full-time students of which 222 are mature students (IT, Sligo, 2016).

The mission statements of Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Sligo and Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, on which this research is based, show their student focus. "Letterkenny Institute of Technology will confirm its significant national profile for excellence in higher education through the pursuit of an ambitious development agenda informed by public policy, strong regional engagement, and a fundamental commitment to a student-centred ethos" (Letterkenny IT, 2016). IT Sligo's mission statement is: "To prepare graduates for complex professional roles in a rapidly changing technological world through research and scholarship to meet the needs of the Connacht-Ulster region and beyond" (Sligo IT, 2016), while Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology's mission statement states: "At GMIT we develop the life-long learning opportunities through our teaching and research, by supporting regional development consistent with national higher education policy." (GMIT, 2016). All three of these mission statements have particular significance for full-time mature students in these colleges. Institutes of Technology, traditionally, have a larger percentage of mature and disadvantaged students than universities and are very involved in industrial development and regional support. It is all the more important, then, in the context of this research to understand how full-time mature students in the colleges of the CUA process information to achieve transformative learning.

In February 2012, the HEA distributed a report entitled "*Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape*" that explains the justification for changes in the Irish higher education framework. These plans are expected to result in a smaller number of larger institutions which have

different but complimentary missions. This depends on the supposition that "increasing institution size...can increase the flexibility that is needed to generate and to allocate resources" (Higher Education Authority, 2013, p.10).

The three institutions on which this research is based have agreed to form the Connacht-Ulster Alliance and are committed to developing "significant and meaningful collaboration on a comprehensive range of activities"(Higher Education Authority, 2013, p.25). At the time of concluding this research, they have declared their intention to seek Technological University status at a future date.

### **1.6 Research Problem, Aims, Anticipated Outcomes & Projected Timeline**

The primary objective of this research is to conduct an exploratory investigation into the transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students at three Irish Institutes of Technology, which, to date, has been a largely neglected sector for research on full-time mature student learning. This research will examine the primary reasons why mature students have decided to return to full-time higher education as well as exploring the core issues identified in the literature that relate to mature student learning. The substantive literature review will take place between January 2016 and January 2017. This phase will also incorporate the confirmation of both the problem definition and the research design. It is anticipated that the fieldwork will occur between January and March of 2017. From March to September, 2017 the data preparation and analysis elements of the research will be undertaken and these will be followed from September 2017 to September 2018 by the thesis preparation. Between September 2018 and December 2018, I will update the literature review in light of the findings from the primary research and prepare the final draft of the thesis in anticipation of its submission in December 2018. Overall, it is anticipated that this research will provide a clear overview of full-time mature students' transformative learning experiences in Irish Institutes of Technology.

The next section outlines the contribution of each of the following chapters to this research.

### **1.7 Chapter Outlines**

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on mature student learning. This chapter provides the theoretical basis for this research on full-time mature students' transformative learning experiences. There are three principal subject areas of core interest. Firstly, strategies

in relation to mature student inclusion are investigated. Secondly, this research looks at the reasons why adults return to full-time education and it identifies factors that influence their decision to pursue full-time education. Thirdly, the learning theories associated with mature students are explored. Following on from this, the work of the most influential scholars in transformative learning is explored. There is a very large volume of writing dealing with this topic and this review presents an overview of the main issues that have emerged from the literature. This leads to an examination of the application of the Head, Heart and Hands Model of Transformative Learning. Then the challenges and factors promoting transformative learning are examined.

Chapter Three explores the methodological approach applied in this research. The theoretical framework gives the research context and the basis and rationale for the use of a mixed research approach. Various research methods are explored and the rationale used in identifying those most suited to this research is presented. The research design applied is then discussed. Following this the data collection procedures used are explained, including selection of participants and response rates. Then the process of data preparation, verification, coding and analysis is described. Finally, ethical considerations relevant to this research are outlined.

Chapter Four introduces the findings from the primary research, as they relate to transformative learning experiences described by full-time mature students. The transformative component of mature student education is followed through the accounts of the mature students themselves. A minimal amount of data analysis is undertaken in this section. This is to permit the specific views of the mature students who participated in this research to be presented in their unanalysed form. To aid in my exploration of this element, I apply the Head, Heart and Hands Model to transformative learning theory.

Chapter Five discusses the findings and makes inferences from the various parts of the research including the literature and the methodology. In this chapter, I also describe a transformative learning experiences framework, which I have developed to represent the interactions between the various elements of this research. Then the final conclusions of the research are presented and these are followed by a number of recommendations which, I believe, will enhance the transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students in Irish institutes of technology.

## **1.8 Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to provide a context for this research. The emphasis of the Institute of Technology sector on the professional and practical elements of education is critical for understanding the setting in which the full-time mature students who took part in this research are learning. The next chapter provides the theoretical context for this research in a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to full-time mature students' transformative learning experiences.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review & Analytical Framework of Mature Students' Learning Experiences**

### **2.1 Introduction**

There have been few studies that investigated the factors that promote transformative learning experiences of mature students in full-time higher education in Ireland (Moran, 2015). This is an important observation given that the research question in this study aims to explore the transformative learning experiences as described by full-time mature students at the three current constituent institutions of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance. Taylor (2008) asserts that conducting research on such factors offers the opportunity to acknowledge the relationship that exists between transformative learning and other important variables for mature students.

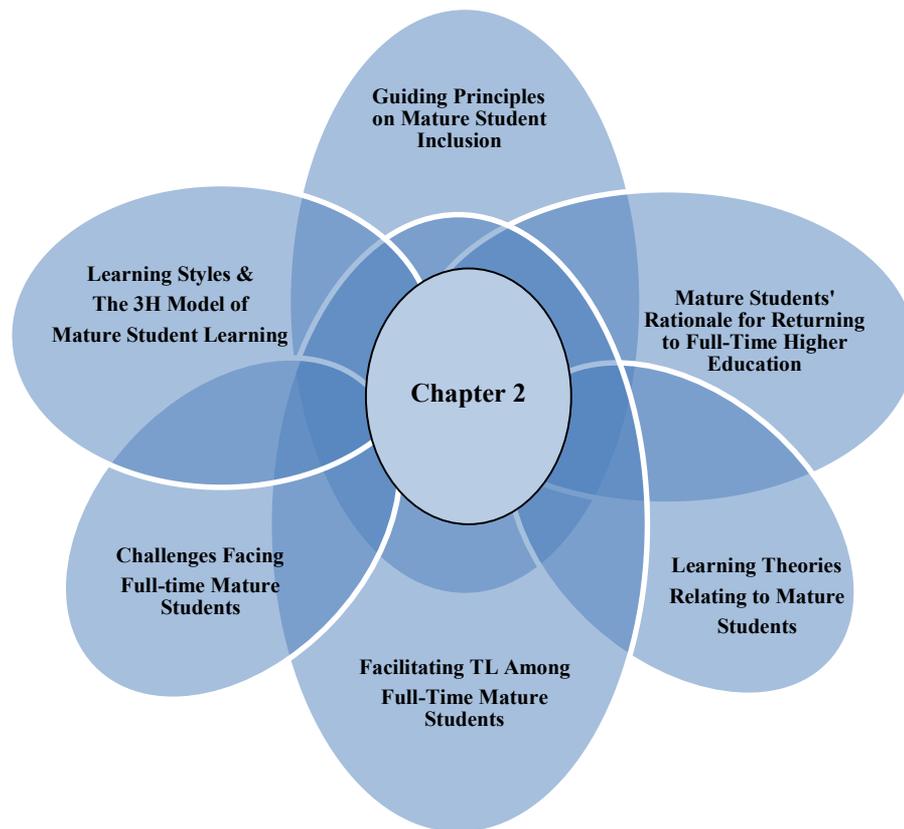
#### ***2.1.1 Chapter Aims***

The aims of this chapter are:

1. To explore the policies which have been developed by institutions and governments to promote mature student participation in full-time third-level education.
2. To examine the factors which are most influential in mature students' decisions to return to full-time education.
3. To explain how adult learning theories relate to full-time mature students' experiences.
4. To identify and discuss the key challenges facing full-time mature students in Irish higher education institutions.
5. To describe core activities that facilitate transformative learning among full-time mature students.
6. To consider the influence that learning styles, including the 3H Model, have on the understanding of mature student learning.

The topics investigated in this literature review are shown in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1 Mature Students' Transformative Learning Literature Review & Analytical Framework**



The focus of both Irish government policy and at a European level is on expanding the rate of third-level involvement among mature students and this is explored in this literature review (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; European Association for the Education of Adults, 2017). As described by O'Carroll et al. (2017), with specific reference to Ireland, "the Department of Education and Skills statistics predict that by 2025, 25% of student entrants will be mature" (p.6). By enhancing the accessibility of higher education for underrepresented segments, including full-time mature students, it is widely accepted that the economy will profit

by having more people gainfully employed. The Irish government is attempting to create a society in which each individual of working age will have the option of pursuing further education or training (Moran, 2015). But some academics have expressed concern that this might focus on employability as the sole purpose of education in situations where governments make decisions on education policies.

The following sections provide an overview of the guiding principles applied to mature students' participation in higher education.

## **2.2 Guiding Principles on Mature Student Inclusion**

In recent years, progress has occurred in making higher education available to an increasing number of students, in particular those from non-traditional sectors, including mature students. 1996 was 'The European Year of Lifelong Learning' (Europa, 1996) and from that point forward Slowey (2010) notes that a significant part of the progress in higher education inclusion has taken place outside of universities, such as Institutes of Technology. Additionally, she noticed that "mature students are more likely to be found on part-time, distance, post-experience and non-credit programmes" (Slowey, 2010, p. 1). It is essential however, that in addition to examining mature students' participation in part-time education, there must be an increasing emphasis placed on encouraging mature students to avail of places in full-time third level education courses.

While the achievement of course objectives is an important component of an individual's education, for full-time mature students, there are broader issues of relevance (UNESCO, 2017).

### ***2.2.1 European Policy on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education***

The Bologna Process is aimed at aligning various higher education systems including marking, the recognition of postgraduate degree qualifications and facilitating student mobility between countries. *"A recent Eurobarometer Survey among students in higher education shows that students want wider access to higher education and that universities should open up co-operation with the world of work and to lifelong learning."* (European Commission, 2009, p.1). This would have beneficial implications for full-time mature students. Ireland's levels of government support in education are higher than the OECD and EU averages for students up

to terminal education age. Nonetheless, with regard to those participating in education over the age of 23, Ireland drops beneath the OECD and EU averages and maybe more worryingly drops lower still as the age of the student rises (European Commission, 2013). In Ireland just 0.2% of the population aged forty or over is in full-time or part-time education as compared to an OECD average of 1.5% and an EU average of 1.3% (OECD, 2011, p.303). This highlights the need for a shift in perspectives to focus more attention and resources on increasing the participation rates of mature students in full-time higher education in Ireland.

### ***2.2.2 Positioning Mature Students in Irish Higher Education Policy***

According to the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 the "capacity of higher education has doubled over the past twenty years and will have to double again over the next twenty" which unmistakably shows greater interest at present in mature student learning than expected (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.6). In Ireland, the *Towards 2016* document distributed by the Department of the Taoiseach, focuses on expanding access for mature and disadvantaged students to further and higher level training and education with a view to enhancing employability for individuals of working age. To accomplish the objective of guaranteeing that individuals of working age have "sufficient income and opportunity to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life" the government and social partners are working towards a nation where "every person of working age would have access to lifelong learning" with a view to entering higher education (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006, p.49). The report encourages the use of "adaptable learning delivery modes, classroom-based, and blended learning, as well as online and accelerated delivery of course material" (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.54). These delivery modes would be very suitable for full-time mature students who favour a more interactive and engaged approach to their learning. This is in light of the expectation that "the majority of the expanded interest in higher education will originate from mature students with the numbers of school leavers rising marginally" (p.44). This report recognises that Ireland's participation in and focus on mature student learning has been exacerbated by the challenges of funding for higher education. In spite of these, when benchmarked against OECD frameworks, the Irish system was "providing better than predicted results at financing levels that are marginally below the average in other countries" (p.110).

Ireland has low levels of mature full-time students' participation in higher education compared to nations like Sweden and the United States (Schuetze and Slowey, 2012). The significance

of, and unique contribution to the learning environment made by mature full-time students in the institutions where they study should be understood and recognised.

Knapper and Cropley (2000) contend that mature student learning is intended to be a procedure whereby the individuals establish how to benefit from all aspects of their lives, not only their education. It concentrates on inspiration, qualities, demeanours and mental self-image which can enhance an individual's preparedness to learn. This meaning of mature student learning in higher education is nearer to the perspective applied in this thesis of what higher education ought to provide.

### ***2.2.3 Meeting Mature Students' Needs***

As indicated by the work of Fleming (2014a, 2014b), numerous adults gravitate towards adult education and further training as a major element in their quest for knowledge and acknowledgment. It should not be suggested that these are the only reasons for mature students to return to full-time third-level education. Certainly, the colleges involved in this research are attempting to attract mature students and to encourage their learning in an adaptable and supportive way and to provide a broader learning experience, rather than being solely exam focused. This takes account of the finding that student involvement and feedback have been shown to be essential to mature students' engagement in the learning process (Bowl, 2014).

At the Institute of Technology, Sligo, a key objective is to "increase the percentage of adult learners and international students" (Institute of Technology, Sligo, 2009, p.10). In addition, a key part of IT Sligo's Learning, Teaching & Assessment Strategy is to "meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body including increased awareness of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, addressing issues that may hinder learners, acknowledging various levels of experience and learning styles of learners and ensuring the location does not disadvantage learners, and addressing the barriers posed for learners by family and social responsibilities" (Institute of Technology, Sligo, 2010, p.3).

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology states its aim is to "meet the national target for participation in higher education with particular reference to life-long learning and underrepresented cohorts" as outlined in Objective Three within the Community Engagement section of their strategic plan (Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, 2016, p.14). The college's mission statement clearly shows a commitment to developing mature student learning

opportunities and the number of mature learners as a proportion of the overall student body is reflective of this.

In Letterkenny Institute of Technology, their Mission Based Performance Compact, which was submitted to the Higher Education Authority in 2013 as part of the application process for Technological University status makes specific mention of the importance of "participation, equal access and lifelong learning" (Letterkenny Institute of Technology Strategy 2014-17, p.25). In addition, the concept of inclusion forms part of the college's declared core values, while its Teaching and Learning Strategy has a focus on facilitating different modes of learning and providing programmes for their increasingly diverse student body. All three of the participant colleges in this research are investing efforts in enhancing full-time mature students' college experiences.

### **2.3 Mature Students' Rationale for Returning to Full-Time Higher Education**

In exploring the transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students within the proposed constituent colleges of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance, it is important to recognise that the inspiration and motivating factors of mature students can be altogether different from those of traditional school-leavers. Woodley and Wilson (2002) identified a variety of reasons provided by mature students for returning to full-time education including self-confidence and interest in the subject-matter being studied.

Osborne et al. (2004) explored how mature students recognise and consider both the positives and negatives related to the aspiration for further education. These can be arranged based on a particular student's primary inspiration for coming back to full-time education. The *delayed traditional* student is one who is like the traditional school leaver, typically in their twenties and is comparable, as far as their interests and level of responsibility, to the traditional school-leaver. The delayed traditional classification incorporates students who have experienced a life-changing event, for example, a divorce and they desire a new start in life. The *single parent* classification includes mainly women who have a family to support financially, socially and emotionally. They confront the fact that their engagement in further education is possibly going to adversely affect their children and dependants, but it may also enhance their family's future. The *careerists* are the individuals who are at present in employment. However, they are looking for opportunities to advance their current professions. The *escapees* are the individuals who are

employed, but are looking for a way out of what they see to be dead-end employment. The final category is the *personal growers*, representing those individuals who are seeking education purely for its own purpose and who undertake higher education for their very own pleasure and satisfaction (Osborne et al, 2004). This categorisation of full-time mature students will play a key role in the empirical element of this research.

Table 2.1 below shows the positive and negative elements, building on Osborne et al. (2004) that influence every mature student category identified.

**Table 2.1: Positive and Negative Influences on Decision to Become a Mature Student**

Positive factors influencing decision to become a student	Categories of mature student	Negative factors influencing decision to become a student
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Interest in studying a subject</li> <li>➤ Long-term necessity to be qualified for a chosen career</li> <li>➤ Ready to settle down</li> <li>➤ Parental support</li> </ul>	<b>Delayed traditional</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Fear of debt</li> <li>➤ No confidence due to old attitudes, school experience - 'not for me'</li> <li>➤ Unwelcoming institutions</li> <li>➤ Worries re juggling job/study</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Liberating experience as incentive</li> <li>➤ Current opportunity - 'time for me'</li> <li>➤ Self-belief</li> <li>➤ Selflessness</li> </ul>	<b>Late starter</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Some financial concerns</li> <li>➤ Lack of confidence</li> <li>➤ Attitudes of family/social group</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Need a good job to support family</li> <li>➤ Want to be a role model for family</li> <li>➤ Take pleasure in learning</li> </ul>	<b>Single Parent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Lack of self-belief</li> <li>➤ Financial 'Catch 22'</li> <li>➤ Timetable difficulties</li> <li>➤ Childcare problems</li> <li>➤ Juggling family, work, study</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Better long-term career prospects</li> <li>➤ Self-worth</li> <li>➤ Interest in studies</li> <li>➤ Employer support and sometimes requirement for career progression</li> </ul>	<b>Careerist</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Need to work so time for study limited</li> <li>➤ Family pressures - never at home</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Better career prospects</li> <li>➤ Better pay</li> <li>➤ Need a change in career direction</li> </ul>	<b>Escapees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Lack of confidence</li> <li>➤ Costs difficult to manage</li> <li>➤ Need to work as well as study</li> <li>➤ Timetable issues</li> <li>➤ Doubts about job market when finished</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Subject interest</li> <li>➤ Existing opportunity</li> <li>➤ Self-belief</li> </ul>	<b>Personal growers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Lack of confidence</li> </ul>

Source: Osborne et al, 2004, p.296

Biesta (2006), suggests that while undoubtedly higher or further education is not suitable for, or appealing to everyone or each profession, what is attractive is the widespread opportunity to take part in further or higher education if the individual so chooses.

The following section identifies the key components that comprise the analytical framework of this study through an exploration of the different theories and theoretical constructs that to help explain mature students' learning experiences.

## **2.4 Analytical Framework**

This research focuses on those mature students who have made the decision to return to full-time higher education. The following section examines the key learning theories, which explore the various ways in which students learn, that relate specifically to mature students. Then, the concept of learning styles, are they relate to mature students is explored with a particular focus on the areas of thinking, feeling and doing, as explored by Singleton's (2015) Head, Heart and Hands Model. The combination of these elements provides the core of the analytical framework applied in this research.

### ***2.4.1 Learning Theories Relating to Mature Students***

Learning theories are conceptual frameworks in which information is consumed, handled, and held during learning. (Illeris, 2004a; 2004b; Ormrod, 2012). This is particularly true in the context of full-time mature student learning, particularly those attending college for the first time as mature students.

There are numerous theories that explore and discuss how adults learn and each has its own merits. In this section, I will examine the more commonly used ones and how they can enhance mature student learning. In addition, I will show briefly how these theories have developed from each other, and then show how, and when, different theories can be applied to capitalise on learning. It should also be noted that "learning" includes the acquisition of three domains: knowledge, skills and attitudes and any theories should ideally account for learning in each of these three domains.

In broad terms, theories of adult learning can be grouped into several categories. There is a significant level of overlap between the theories and their categorisations, and the following section provides a comprehensive overview of these.

- Instrumental learning theories - these focus on the learner's individual experience
- Behavioural learning theories - Stimuli in the environment can produce changes in behaviour.
- Cognitive learning theories - Learning is focused on mental and psychological processes, perception and processing of information not on behaviour
- Experiential learning is presented as a methodology of education in which learning has an impact on the whole person, including spiritually, emotionally (affect) and behaviourally. This is in addition to cognitive stimulation. Experiential learning has been commonly defined as “learning by doing”. However, this, in my view is an oversimplification. The following definition is preferable, as it describes experiential learning as a process: “Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant(s) spiritually, cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterised by a high level of active involvement” (Hoover & Whitehead, 1975, p.25). While experiential learning is preferred to more formal teaching methods by mature students, the fact that many classroom settings involve both mature and traditional students, who favour more lecturer-directed learning, sharing class-time means that experiential learning by mature students more generally occurs outside of the classroom environment.
- Humanistic theories - Centred on the learner, these theories focus on an individual's potential for self-actualisation, self-direction and internal motivation. The focus of these theories on mature students makes them directly relevant to this research. Two key humanistic theories, which are of interest in this research are:
  - Andragogy - The explanation of adults’ motivation and disposition to learning.
  - Constructivism - This involves a significant level of self-directed learning which, in turn, suggests that mature students can plan, conduct and assess their own learning (Arogundade, 2011).
- Transformative learning theory - Explores how critical reflection can be used to challenge a learner's beliefs and assumptions and forms the basis for this research and as such is discussed in more detail below.
- Social theories of learning - These require the “two crucial” elements of context and community. They include cognitive situated theories that consider learning and thinking

as social activities taking place in a community and influenced by context (Davis and Forrest, 2008).

- Motivational models - These emphasise the value of internal motivation and reflection as necessary for learning.
- Reflective models - These hold that reflection leads to change. Reflective learning (Schön, 1987) and deliberate practice theories are examples of these models (Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson, 2004).

Three of these educational theories are considered to be of particular significance to this review: Andragogy, Constructivism and Transformative Learning. Their importance to this research stems from its focus on the learning experiences of mature students. The work of the key educational theorists in each of these areas is now explored in detail.

### ***Andragogy***

The term Andragogy, referring to the "art and science of helping adults to learn" (Henschke, 2011, p.34) was first coined by Alexander Kapp in 1833 and was popularised by adult learning theorist Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s.

In the 1980s, Knowles made a number of important assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners (Andragogy) that are different from the assumptions about child learners (Pedagogy).

1. *The need to know:* For a mature learner, it is important for them to identify why they need to know particular facts or information.
2. *Self-concept:* As a person matures his or her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.
3. *Adult Learner Experience:* As an individual develops, he or she accumulates experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
4. *Readiness to Learn:* This reflects how the individual's readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his or her social roles.
5. *Orientation to Learning:* As a mature student, a person's perspective of time changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Accordingly, his or her orientation toward learning shifts from one of being subject focused to being task focused.

6. *Motivation to Learn:* As a person matures the motivation to learn comes from within the person (Knowles et al., 2005).

These observations, in association with David Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984), have allowed the consideration of learning and teaching strategies appropriate for adult learners. Each of these characteristics of mature students is relevant to this research.

In addition to these assumptions, in 1984, Knowles suggested four principles that are applied to mature student learning:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction. This means that mature students need to recognise what they are learning as well as why they are learning.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities. While mature students are often more inclined to view a mistake as a learning experience, traditional students can easily become discouraged from making further attempts to accomplish a particular task.
3. Adults are most interested in studying subjects that have immediate relevance and impact on their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centred rather than content-oriented. It is very evident from my own lecturing experience that mature students have a preference for theoretical material which has clear applications in the real world.

Lindeman, (cited in Knowles et al., 2011), suggests that educators should reflect more on how mature students learn rather than the material that they were learning. His work, based on five key assumptions about mature students, forms the basis for practically every subsequent adult learning theory.

**Table 2.2 Summary of Lindeman's Key Assumptions about Mature Students**

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

*Source: Knowles et al., 2011, p.38*

Knowles enhanced Lindeman's work in the 1970s. He acknowledged that mature students are "self-directed and autonomous and that the teacher is a facilitator of learning rather than presenter of content" (Henschke, 2011, p.34). However, there has been much criticism of Knowles' work. Among the most convincing non-conformists was Jarvis (1984) who argued that there was a lack of definitive research to legitimise a total acknowledgment of this hypothesis. Jarvis's point is understandable to the extent that we cannot totally acknowledge Knowles' hypothesis as truth given that it has not been experimentally tested.

Henschke (2011) believes that at some point andragogy will become a more recognised scientific academic discipline, in much the same way as transformative learning theory has developed over time and will slowly become more recognised and accepted among both researchers and academics.

While the focus of Andragogy is on the general issue of mature student learning, it is critically important to gain an understanding of how mature students learn, and in particular the desire of many mature students to be active participants in their own learning experiences.

This forms the basis for Constructivism, as described in the following section.

### ***Constructivism***

This is a learning approach which is favoured by many full-time mature students, where the majority of the learning does not take place as a result of reading from a textbook, but rather by taking an active role in one's learning through engaging in learning activities. This theory suggests that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences. Constructivists, like Vygotsky (1997), consider that learning is a process of constructing new knowledge built on the foundations of what one already knows, which they refer to as a *zone*

*of proximal development*. Conversations between mature students and educators can extend the zone of proximal development by linking new ideas to current understanding. Of particular importance to those who follow a broadly constructivist line will be their previous experiences or knowledge, and the level of contrast between this and their definitive experience that is provided as the learning opportunity. When students see something new, or attend a new lecture, they compare this experience with what we already know, and reflect on the differences (Schön, 1983). This enables them to make sense of the new data, which will then lead them to test this new knowledge, through debate and discussion. This thinking has been advanced in social learning theories by Bandura (1977) and by Wenger using the concept of learning communities or “Communities of Practice” (Wenger, 1998).

This is a process which may be familiar to individuals acquainted with scientific methods. However, at least one key element is missing, namely reflection on action. In other words, it is critical that the learner thinks about the process they have used, and the extent to which they were rigorous or appropriate in the use of the material. This is a fundamental element of learning.

There are many perspectives of constructivism, but one prominent theorist known for his constructivist views is Jean Piaget, who focused on how humans make meaning in relation to the interaction between their experiences and their ideas, primarily through the observation of children. Piaget's theory of constructivist learning has had a wide-ranging impact on learning theories and teaching methods in education.

Social constructivism encourages the learner to arrive at his or her version of the truth, influenced by his or her background, culture or worldview (Wertsch, 1997).

Social constructivism suggests that knowledge is first constructed in a social context and then by individuals. Many scholars, (see for example, Bruning et al., 1999; Newman, Griffin & Cole, 1989; Eggen & Kauchak, 2004), view learning as an active process where learners should learn to discover principles, concepts and facts for themselves, thus illustrating the importance of encouraging speculation and intuitive thinking in learners (Brown et al., 1989; Ackerman, 2001). Other constructivist scholars agree with this and emphasise that individuals create meanings through their interactions with each other and with the environment in which they live. Knowledge is therefore a product of human interactions and is socially and culturally constructed (Ernest, 1991; Prawat and Floden, 1994).

A crucial assumption of constructivism concerns the level and source of motivation for learning. According to Von Glasersfeld (1989), sustaining motivation to learn is strongly dependent on the learner's confidence in his or her potential for learning (Prawat and Floden 1994). This view mirrors Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978).

In applying constructivist theory to mature student learning in the third-level education sector, the lecturer and the learners are equally involved in learning from each other (Holt and Willard-Holt, 2000; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Kukla, 2000). This means that the learning experience is both subjective and objective and requires that the lecturers become an essential part of the interaction between learners and tasks in the shaping of their understanding and developing a new perspective.

In the context of third-level education, there is also potential here for traditional school-leavers to learn from the experiences of their full-time mature student classmates (Brownstein, 2001).

To do this, learners must not only take ownership of the learning process, but also of the problem itself (Derry, 1999; Rhodes and Bellamy, 1999). This allows the learning experience to become shared between the lecturer and the mature student, (Brown et al., 1989; Ackerman, 2001).

The development by mature students of independent thinking patterns and behaviours, in turn, enhances their prospects for a deeper level of learning and ultimately their likely achievement of transformative learning, as described in the following section.

### ***Transformative Learning Theory***

Transformative learning was first recognised among women returning to higher education by Mezirow (1978a, 1978b). He considered the experiences of these women as not merely adapting to their changing circumstances by more conscientiously applying old ways of learning, but also determining a need to acquire new perspectives in order to develop a more complete understanding of their changing environments.

However, it is apparent that since Mezirow (1991a, 1991b) presented the transformative dimensions of adult learning in the field of education, the further development of transformative learning has primarily occurred in North America. The vast majority of scholars

who may be characterised as pioneers in this specific field of adult learning theory live and work in the US or Canada.

In addition, most of the influential books on transformative learning were published originally in the United States (e.g. Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991a, 1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1998b; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Mezirow, Taylor & Associates, 2009) with the only journal which was primarily focused on advancing transformative learning theory being published in association with the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education.

In contrast, adult educators in Europe have formed communities within which they have been experimenting, researching and developing both the theory and practice of transformative learning. Additionally, adult educators from various European countries have published and presented their transformative learning research work in conferences and scientific journals. These educators are achieving their theoretical and practical aims within a social, political and cultural structure that has its own historical background and from which theories relating to the phenomenon of learning evolve.

Kokkos (2014) explores the distinctions and commonalities that exist between the transformative learning research carried out by North American researchers and that of their European counterparts. The majority of both European and North American researchers anchor their explorations of transformative learning theory to Mezirow's work. However, references to other scholars of transformative learning theory are fewer in European-based research compared to the North American publications.

For many years, the development of transformative learning theory, as conceptualised by North American writers, has included topics that refer to ideas, methods and strategies that promote perspective transformation, enhance the theory of transformative learning with innovative views, and reinforce its practical application. On the other hand, the majority of the few European writers that deal with transformative learning do not position their approaches within its theoretical framework. Rather, they ground their research on other theoretical backgrounds that have been developed in Europe. Consequently, they combine their approaches to transformative learning theory with the exploration of the work of a wide range of important European scholars.

I believe that the integration of more ideas from European scholars with those of North American researchers, in the development of transformative learning theory, could broaden its base and offer an additional potential. Likewise, I believe that European writers could enrich their approaches if they were to include more components of the continuous work of North American adult educators and theorists in their work. Ultimately, I would argue that both sides could benefit greatly if they were to become more actively engaged with the ideas of one another.

According to Cranton (1994), Mezirow's transformative learning theory has evolved into a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate and reformulate the meaning of their experience. It will be used in this research to explore the transformative learning experiences among a sample of full-time mature students from the CUA.

Caleja (2014) provides a wide-ranging discussion of the evolution of Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory and its conceptualisation. His research explores three major influences, namely Thomas Kuhn's philosophical conception of paradigm, Freire's conception of conscientisation and consciousness growth, and Habermas' domains of learning and the discussion of language as communicative action.

Kuhn's (1962) paradigmatic transformations in scientific knowledge provided a basis for Mezirow's notion of transformative learning. Kuhn used a paradigm to refer 'to a collection of ways of seeing, methods of inquiry, beliefs, ideas, values, and attitudes that influence the conduct of scientific inquiry' (Mezirow, 1991a).

The second major concept, which Mezirow considers, from Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, is conscientisation, which is defined as 'developing a critical awareness, so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality'. In a higher education environment, while Freire argued for a transformative relationship between students and lecturers, he conceded that developing and maintaining such a relationship is difficult. Full-time mature students can challenge this perception by being actively involved in their own learning experience.

The third key influence in Mezirow's theory is the work of Jürgen Habermas. Two aspects of Habermas' theory that had a significant impact on Mezirow's transformative learning theory are the *sociolinguistic context* and the *dynamics of communicative action*.

The sociolinguistic context refers to the need for a common understanding of what is being said on the part of both the speaker and the listener. For Habermas, this requires that mutual trust exists between the parties. However, in the context of this research, it can be difficult to build mutual trust between lecturers and students without crossing ethical boundaries. The second element of Habermas's theory, that has impacted the work of Mezirow, explores the dynamics of language as communicative action. Habermas (1984) highlights four forms of discourse, the first of which is explicative discourse, relating to well-structured expressions. The second is theoretical discourse. This explores the knowledge individuals hold about the world that can be validated by practical investigation. The third type of discourse is referred to as practical discourse. This deals with statements made that link to social norms, ideals, values, and moral decisions' (Mezirow, 1991b). The fourth type of discourse, which is termed therapeutic discourse, involves feelings or intentions, both of which relate to an individual's subjectivity. Habermas (1984) argues that it is through the demonstration of each of these four categories of discourse that discursive action can take place, and this in turn, results in the opportunity to transform meaning schemes and perspectives (Mezirow, 1991b).

Four key themes from transformative learning theory have specific relevance to mature students: *effective change in frame of reference, critical reflection, knowledge acquisition and perspective transformation*. Each of these is discussed in the next section within the context of full-time mature student learning in higher education.

### ***Effective Change in Frame of Reference***

According to Mezirow (1991a, 1991b), the principal goal of adult education is transformative learning. This may be defined as the process of effective change in a frame of reference (Khabanyane et al., 2014). A significant number of prolific American and European researchers on transformative learning including Cranton, (1994, 1996); King, (1997b, 2000, 2005); Mezirow, (1991a, 1995, 1996, 2000a); Taylor, (2008); Dirkx, (2006) and Boyd & Meyers, (1988) agree that transformative learning is the process of affecting change in a frame of reference, which are the structures of assumptions through which mature students come to have a better understanding of their experiences.

The concept of frame of reference is made up of two elements, namely habit of mind and point of view. Habit of mind is a broad, abstract, orienting, habitual way of thinking, feeling, and

acting that is persuaded by assumptions that comprise a set of cultural, political, social, educational, and economic codes (Mezirow, 1997a). The habit of mind is expressed in a particular point of view to include the range of beliefs, value judgments, attitudes, and feelings that shape a particular individual's interpretation of a given situation. The habit of mind represents the process by which mature students solve problems and identify a need to modify their own assumptions (Mezirow, 1997b).

Points of view are more transient than either habits of mind or frames of reference. An individual's points of view may be transformed when they become critically reflective of a problem or the problem-solving process. Both points of view and habits of mind can be completely altered as a result of full-time mature students' learning experiences.

### ***Critical Reflection***

Mezirow (2000b) contends that transformative learning may be purposeful and involve critical reflection, or it may be a result of repetitive subconscious interactions by the student. Mature students are likely to acquire a consistent range of experiences including associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditions as well as frames of reference that define their world (Cranton, 1994, 1996; Mezirow, 1991a, 1996, 2000a). This process requires a high level of self-critical reflective thinking to focus on the mature student's beliefs, values, and understanding of a range of learning concepts (Brookfield, 1986, 2000; Cranton, 2002; Mezirow, 2000b).

### ***Knowledge Acquisition***

In many Irish academic institutions, the curriculum traditionally involves little or no student participation in the classroom. In this setting, the lecturer is at the centre of the students' learning experience and students depend on lecturers for knowledge within this structure. The acquisition of knowledge is based more on rote learning and creating patterns in the processing of information. In such an educational environment, there may be few opportunities for engaging in transformative learning. Freire (1970) referred to this as “the banking” method of learning in which the lecturer deposits information in the minds of those students whom the teacher has deemed to be worthy of receiving the gift of knowledge.

This can continue to impact individuals when they return to third-level education in later years as full-time mature students.

In contrast, while lecturers using transformative learning principles do not present course material in a significantly different manner, the intended outcome from the learning process is different. It frequently necessitates the use of alternative and often novel tools and strategies. While this approach can be welcomed enthusiastically by full-time mature students, traditional students tend to be more reluctant to engage with this and embrace transformative learning principles.

### ***Perspective Transformation***

Transformative learning theory states that the process of "perspective transformation" has three dimensions: psychological (changes in understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioural (changes in lifestyle) (Clark, 1993). Mezirow (1978a) considered perspective transformation as the process of how mature students could revise their meaning structures. It is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why assumptions have become limiting factors in the way people observe, understand, and feel about the world. As an individual matures, they tend to question more why particular events occur. According to Mezirow and Associates (2000), perspective transformation is a means of reformulating assumptions to facilitate a more inclusive, discriminating, transparent, integrative perspective, and of making decisions.

Cranton (2000) discussed that through perspective transformation experiences, mature students alter their comprehension or assumptions in order to more effectively deal with new information.

According to Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, and Casey (2001), it is critical to acknowledge the experiences of mature students as they engage in learning. For mature students, education allows them to obtain the tools for expressing their views, understanding, and functioning as they move toward a state of heightened awareness of their academic and non-academic experiences (Hart, 2001). The first two columns of Table 2.3 below summarise the ten phases of transformative learning as outlined by Mezirow, based on his initial work on the topic in 1978. I added the third column in the course of this research to provide examples of practical applications of these ten phases, as they relate to mature students and stem from examples in the literature (Cranton, 2000; Clarke, 2003). These applications were subsequently used to enhance the explanations provided to students in the reflective accounts used in this research, as will be described in Chapter 3.

**Table 2.3 Mezirow's 10 Phases of Transformative Learning Applied to Mature Students**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Mezirow's Description of Phase</b>	<b>Application to Mature Students</b>
1	<i>A disorienting dilemma.</i>	Some change occurs in personal circumstances
2	<i>A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame.</i>	Feeling of unfulfilled potential and inadequacy.
3	<i>A critical assessment of assumptions.</i>	Examination of their place in society.
4	<i>Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared.</i>	Relating to experiences of other mature learners.
5	<i>Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions.</i>	Impact on personal relationships; concerns about integrating with other students.
6	<i>Planning a course of action.</i>	Financial, time and childcare concerns and their related implications
7	<i>Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.</i>	Attending lectures, self-directed learning.
8	<i>Provisional trying of new roles.</i>	Work experience, completing assignments and exams.
9	<i>Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.</i>	Achieving learning outcomes, gaining qualification, using skills in a workplace setting.
10	<i>A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective.</i>	Reassessment and consideration of oneself how one's circumstances have changed.

**Source: Adapted from Mezirow, 2000, p.22**

It is important to note that while the phases of transformative learning are generally described in the literature as being linear and orderly, in reality, these 10 steps may not necessarily be linear (Mezirow, 1994; Cranton, 1994). A number of researchers have condensed the process into three or four steps (Taylor, 2007). One version included only the steps of critical reflection, discourse, and action (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Some researchers (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003) have emphasised their "disproof" of transformative learning, because they have shown it not to require the first step of disorienting dilemma. Mezirow has stated that all steps are not required to experience transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978a,

1994), although Brock (2007) showed quantitative evidence that the more of these steps accomplished, the more likely it is for transformative learning will occur.

Transformations may be sudden, dramatic and life changing, resulting in insights that cause an individual's reorientation, or they may be incremental involving a gradual series of changes in related perspectives that result in a transformation of outlook or habit of thinking (Mezirow et al., 2000). In addition, more than one of the phases can occur simultaneously. For example, an individual may experience feelings of guilt or shame (phase 2) based on their own perceived position in society (phase 3).

Researchers on transformative learning including Cranton (1994), King (1997), O'Sullivan (2002), and Tisdell (2000, 2003) have argued that factors such as culture, social issues, spirituality, and the financial challenges faced by many mature students, which are not linked to formal educational experiences, can contribute to their transformative learning. In particular, Tisdell (2008) criticised Mezirow for largely ignoring components of the unconscious and spirituality as contributory factors to transformative learning. Clark (1993) and Willis (2002) have identified five distinct strands of thought based on the transformative learning theories of key writers including Jack Mezirow, Paulo Freire, Larry Daloiz, Robert Boyd and Peter Willis. The work conducted in this area by these and other researchers is discussed collectively in the next section.

#### ***2.4.2 Perspectives of Key Contributors to Transformative Learning Theory***

Transformative learning theory first emerged on the academic landscape over 40 years ago. Early influences included the work of Kuhn (1962) on paradigms, Freire's (1970) conscientisation and Habermas's (1971, 1984) domains of learning (Kitchenham, 2008) followed by much theoretical critique (e.g. Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006; Hart, 1990; Merriam, 2004; Newman, 1994, 2012; Tennant, 1993). In addition, research about the theory has continued to grow exponentially. The following sections explore the similarities and differences that exist between the perspectives of key writers within the transformative learning domain. This is followed by an explanation of how the perspectives presented relate to this study.

### ***Mezirow: Transformation as Critical Reflection***

As the man credited with coining the term transformative learning, Jack Mezirow's work on transformative learning among mature students is possibly the most fully recognised and understood of all the researchers in this area. At the core of his thinking were the concepts of reflection, critical reflection and critical self-reflection, a process he ultimately referred to as perspective transformation. Mezirow (1991a) identified three types of reflection on experience: content, process, and premise. Content reflection refers to thinking about the actual experience itself; process reflection involves considering how to handle the experience; and premise reflection involves a critical examination of long-held, socially constructed assumptions, beliefs, and values about the experience or problems. Premise reflection can involve a range of assumptions that mature students hold relating to themselves (narrative), the general environment in which they live (systemic), their workplace (organisational), the ethical decision making (moral-ethical), or feelings and outlooks (Mezirow, 1998a). In the context of this research, it is clear, based on Mezirow's 10 steps of transformative learning that a number of the full-time mature students who participated in this research achieved transformative learning. This is reflected in the descriptions they provided of their own transformative experiences. The work of Mezirow is pivotal to this research, primarily due to its application of the 10 phases of transformative learning he developed.

### ***Freire: Transformation as Consciousness-raising***

Paulo Freire (1970) presented a theoretical view of transformative learning based on the concept of "conscientiousness" or raising consciousness. Freire's work has resulted in the advancement of the global argument for the importance of mature student learning (Collins, 1991; Welton, 1995). From Freire's viewpoint, mature student learning exceeds providing basic literacy skills to adults and aims to ensure these mature students become critically conscious of their own situations and the world around them and question apparent inconsistencies in their societies (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). In doing so, learners can gain insights on issues which may be the source of many problems in their lives and which, in turn, may result in them having developed a particular self-image. Freire contends that education has the capacity to empower mature students. This, then gives them the ability to consider their own particular reality and therefore, to transform it.

***Daloz: Transformation as Development***

According to Daloz, transformative learning appears to be focused on individual change rather than on modifying social structures. He appears to be less concerned about the development of transformative teaching methods and argues that more structured and instructive interactions can be very important in assisting mature students with developing new understandings of their changing situations. Daloz shows that while these learning experiences can lead to a positive outcome, such as empowerment, they may also have a destabilising component based on the mature students' development of better approaches for perceiving both themselves and the world around them.

***Boyd: Transformation as Individuation***

Boyd's thoughts on transformative learning form what he refers to as 'transformative education' (Boyd and Myers, 1988). He stresses the important role played by consciousness in mature student learning. Boyd's work does not have a particular and clearly explained pedagogical structure or framework. From his perspective, a key element of a teaching method is exploring and verbalising the mature students' experiences, as they affect their everyday lives. These might be presented in the form of stories, dance, poetry or images among other forms. The appealing element of Boyd's perspective is his facilitation of self-expression. This is a critical and frequently overlooked element of full-time mature student learning. The application of mature students' learning experiences to their everyday lives, as described by Boyd, is linked to the re-integration stages of Mezirow's transformative learning process.

***Willis: Transformative Learning as Existential Process***

Willis (2002) explains transformative learning as being focused on the actual process of a human's existence. His methodology contrasts with others. He clarifies that transformative learning is a result which connects with and involves the entire mature student as an individual. Based on this understanding, he explains that learning involves significant levels of individual change and this change is recognised by the mature students themselves as having a transformative effect on them. Here again, the focus is on the individual, to the exclusion of the full-time mature student's wider environment.

### ***Other Perspectives on Transformative Learning***

O'Sullivan (2002) criticised Mezirow's work due to its focus on the individual rather than social transformation, stating that transformative learning goes beyond the psychological, spiritual and practical responsibilities of people's everyday lives. "Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body-awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy" (O'Sullivan, 2002, p. 274). Taylor (2007) agrees with this perspective and states that: "The role of culture and/or difference and transformative learning continues to be poorly understood" (p. 178). Tisdell (2002, 2003) argues that the field of transformative learning of mature students in higher education, places very little focus how adults construct knowledge through unconscious and symbolic processes in general, including cultures. Preece (2004), equally, argued that transformative learning is a complex process but one that finds context within the individual's interpretation of their environment. Merriam and Ntseane (2008) concluded that transformative learning is often about recognising one's inner voice in conjunction with critical self-examination. Clark and Wilson (1991) suggested that the development of meaning in transformative learning is context dependent and is influenced by issues including culture and language. Honneth (2014) advances ideas about identity development and freedom that allow for the updating of gaps in transformative learning theory. He argues that researchers and academics largely have an inadequate understanding of the social dimension of learning and he proposes a new understanding of 'disorienting dilemma' as a struggle for recognition.

In summary, Freire's perspective on transformative learning focuses on identifying sources of problems and improving an individual's self-image. Daloz argues that students must be inspired to seek out and pursue higher education opportunities. Boyd suggests that a mature student's self-image forms the basis for their actions. Willis contends that learning, of necessity, involves a substantial level of change on the part of the mature student and that it is this process of changing that triggers transformative learning. O'Sullivan's focus is on social transformation rather than at the level of the individual, while Taylor's perspective includes concerns over gender, status and cultural issues. Preece looks to the individual's environment to gain an understanding of his or her transformative learning. Merriam and Ntseane take a more global

perspective in describing transformative learning as a process involving self-examination, while Clark and Wilson view transformative learning as a context-specific and dependent process that is influenced by an individual's language and culture. Honneth's work on the connection between a desire for personal recognition and transformative learning has had little impact on the broader educational domain (Murphy & Brown, 2012; Huttunen, 2007, 2009), but has had some influence in terms of its connection with transformative learning (Fleming, 2014). The various theories that have been advanced here have relevance for understanding transformative learning. However, all of these theories have one aim in common, they are seeking either to improve or discredit the initial ideas presented by Mezirow.

Despite the criticisms levelled at the work of Mezirow and his advocates, their work still provides a comprehensive and applicable perspective on transformative learning by highlighting the process and anchoring arguments within the higher education realm. Therefore, it is the perspective that has been used in this research to inform the structures of both the reflective accounts and photo elicitation interviews which will be explained in detail in the next chapter.

Having evaluated the contributions made by a number of key writers and researchers in the area of transformative learning, the following section examines activities that can be used in its promotion.

## **2.5 Activities that Promote Transformative Learning**

According to Pohland and Bova (2000), Macleod et al. (2003), Mallory (2003), Feinstein (2004), and King (1997; 2004), one of the best ways to promote transformative learning for mature students is to provide them with learning experiences such as direct, personally engaging and stimulating reflections on their own personal experiences. Taylor (2000) also identifies activities that are known to promote transformative learning experiences of mature students specifically in higher education. These include critical thinking skills, personal self-reflection, classroom discussions and dialogues, and mentoring. Each of these is discussed in the next section.

### ***Critical Thinking***

Brookfield (1987), describes critical thinking as the process of examining assumptions that form the basis of beliefs, values, and ways of understanding. Many researchers and writers have explored and discussed in some detail how critical thinking skills could be used to empower mature students to reflect on and refine their ideas, assumptions, beliefs, and values (Brookfield, 2000; Cranton, 2006a). Critical thinking is at the core of transformative learning and it provides many of its facilitating strategies (Brookfield, 1987; Cranton, 1994; Dirkx, 1997; Pilling-Cormick, 1997). King (2005) argued that some mature students transform from passive students into class leaders through critical thinking.

Cranton (2006a) discusses how lecturers can apply critical thinking to empower mature students by giving them challenging assignments within the lecturing environment. The lecturer needs to encourage critical self-reflection and this can be done using questions, experiential learning, critical reflections, and journals among other methods. Because critical thinking involves self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking, it is intuitively appealing to mature students (Cranton, 2006a).

### ***Personal Self-reflection***

Personal self-reflection, as explained by Mezirow (2000) is the ability of the mature student to question the validity of assumptions and beliefs they hold based on previous experience. It can ultimately lead to perspective transformation. According to Brookfield (2000), critical self-reflection is central to transformative learning.

Several other researchers (Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman; 2006; Chimera, 2006; Kichenham, 2006; Ziegler, Paulus & Woodside, 2006) also maintained that personal self-reflection can be promoted among mature students when lecturers use instructional tools such as reflective accounts. Mezirow (2000) explained that in order for a mature student to learn independently and completely, there must be critical discourse involving two core elements. The first is what Kegan (2000) identified as the development of the adult's ability to become critically self-reflective. In other words, mature students are expected to critically examine their own perspectives. The second is what King and Kitchener (1994) termed as reflective judgment, that is, the capacity to engage in a critical discussion involving the evaluation of the individual's assumptions, values, beliefs and feelings.

### ***Classroom Discussions and Dialogues***

Brookfield and Preskill (2005) argue that there should be lively critical discussion for the purposes of probing meaning, questioning assumptions and supporting learners, taking place among mature students in a higher education environment. In-class discussions can also be very beneficial for all of the class members due to the variety of personal experiences which many full-time mature students can describe.

Carter (2002) concluded in a research study that the use of dialogue in the classroom places a lot of emphasis and importance on trustful communication, personal interactions, and self-disclosure. According to Mezirow et al. (2000), an ideal condition to promote transformative learning using reflective dialogue is one where there is freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception and which encourages openness to alternative points of view.

In addition, Cranton (2006) outlined a number of criteria to be used in a mature student learning context when the lecturer wishes to engage in dialogue. These include finding a provocative way to stimulate dialogue; developing discourse procedures; avoiding making dismissive statements and facilitating time for reflection.

### ***Mentoring***

Mentoring provides a method of providing psychological, emotional, and technical support to the mature student as and when it is needed (Daloz, 1987; Bloom, 1995). Daloz (1987) explained that mentoring can lead to the development of innovative ways of questioning the learning process itself as well as the environment in which it takes place. Mentoring can also assist mature students in dealing with interpersonal interactions that can help them to achieve their learning transformations.

Brookfield (1987) argued that mentoring would be of most benefit to the mature student in a structured group setting. While there is no general consensus in the literature as to the value of mentoring, in practice it can be useful in smaller group settings where each individual not only has the opportunity, but is actively encouraged to participate in the group discussion.

This section shows that while there are marked similarities in the educational experiences of full-time traditional and mature students, such as their requirements to meet learning outcomes and to engage with others in their classes, particularly in the course of group-work, the

experience of the full-time mature student in returning to higher education also differs greatly from that of the traditional student. The next section of this chapter identifies a number of challenges, which are specific to mature students, as described in the literature.

## **2.6 Challenges Facing Mature Students**

Many adults benefit from returning to education (Dawson, 2003). However, adults face considerable challenges when taking that step. Some of the biggest obstacles include lack of time, finances, confidence issues, lack of support systems, accessibility to college campus and classes, feelings of being too old to learn and social anxieties (Dawson, 2003). Murphy and Fleming (2003), in their research into mature students in higher education, also found a number of challenges facing the students. The most significant, aside from financial issues, were relationships with partners, other external commitments, the academic components of essay writing and exams.

Education systems all over the world are changing rapidly, partly due to developments in information technology (IT) (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Lack of IT skills is a typical problem among older learners. Studies done in the UK, Australia, by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland and by the European Commission (EC) showed that large numbers of older learners had little or no IT skills (EC, 2013; NALA, 2009; Taylor & Rose, 2005), and that IT skills are a powerful tool to raise the levels of literacy and numeracy among adult learners (Kambouri, Mellar & Logan, 2006; NALA, 2009). This would have the additional impact of increasing self-confidence among mature students. To this end, NALA (2009), The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 (DES & SOLAS, 2014) and Kambouri et al. (2006) suggest embedding IT skills aimed specifically at mature students within programmes. This strategy could also be considered by Institutes of Technology. Taylor and Rose (2005) stress that low IT skills are not only a barrier to learning, but they also have an impact on the successful engagement and retention of older learners. However, with a focused effort on the part of colleges, this obstacle can be overcome.

Another more significant and widespread challenge to the successful achievement of transformative learning lies within its core concept of critical reflection. Critical reflection as a theoretical construct and reflective practice has been viewed as central to the theory of transformative learning since its conception. Mezirow (1990) emphasises this in saying: “by

far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical [reflection] - reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting” (p. 13).

Despite its long-standing position at the centre of transformative learning theory, it is a contested term, which incorporates a variety of related conceptions (e.g. reflection, reflexivity, critical self-reflection or critical thinking). In addition, there is inconsistency in the definitions of critical self-reflection that prevail and yet it is among the least studied concepts, taking into consideration its significance to transformative learning (Brookfield, 2000a; Van Woerkom, 2010; Taylor 2012).

To provide clarity to Mezirow’s concept of critical reflection, it is useful to begin with Brookfield’s (2000a) four traditions of critical reflection. These include the emphasis on ideology critique, associated with Frankfurt School (Mezirow, 2000): *“It describes the process by which people learn to recognise how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices”* (p. 128). A second tradition is the reassessment of early life traumas, as shown in the original research on transformative learning involving women returning to school where through a process of personal reflection and “self-examination of feelings, critical reflection, exploring and planning new roles, negotiating relationships, and building confidence” (Van Woerkom, 2010, p. 342). Through this process, many of the women were led to a more inclusive worldview. A third category of study is that of an analytic philosophy. This is embedded in the work of Kuhn (1962) that focuses on logic, reason, opinion, judgment, and evidence through evaluating arguments and competing perspectives. The fourth and final category is that of pragmatism, which helps to explain the role that critical reflection plays in creating meaning from experiences. This perspective asserts that it is through the questioning of deeply held assumptions that individuals learn to appreciate and accept the shortfalls of universal truths (Brookfield, 2000). Each of these traditions highlights an aspect of Mezirow’s conception of critical reflection as it has evolved over the years moving away from its foundations in critical theory towards a focus on psychological change.

Critical reflection was originally defined in relation to transformative learning as critical reflectivity, and it had seven levels of reflection. In 1991, Mezirow collapsed these levels into three dimensions of reflection including content (reflecting on what we perceive, think, feel,

and act) process (reflecting on how we perform the functions of perceiving), and “premise reflection [which] involves becoming aware of the why we perceive, think, feel or act as we do” (p. 108).

In light of this perspective on transformative learning involving integration of thinking, feeling and doing into the learning process, the following section explores the concept of learning styles that incorporate these elements, which are of major significance to mature student learning.

## **2.7 Learning Styles**

Over the last forty years, researchers representing diverse theoretical perspectives on learning have discovered that individuals develop consistent approaches to learning called learning styles (Sims & Sims, 2006, cited in Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009). The learning style is the individual's preferred way of thinking about, processing and understanding information.

Newble, Entwistle and their research associates, in a variety of research studies (Newble & Clarke, 1986; Newble & Entwistle, 1986), have shown that there are numerous learning styles, and that learners have a variety of learning preferences. Recognising the different styles is important as lectures predominantly tend to appeal more to surface learners and independent project work will likely appeal more to deep learners.

However, the learning style perspective has been contested among critical educational researchers including Ferrel (1983) who tested a number of learning style theories, including Kolb's Learning Styles Theory. In Kolb's scheme, a learner has a specific experience (feeling) upon which they reflect (watching). Through their reflection they are able to formulate abstract concepts (thinking), and make relevant generalisations. They then confirm their understanding by testing the application (doing) of their knowledge in new situations. This, then, provides them with a verifiable experience, and the cycle continues. In theory, learners with different learning styles will have strengths in different quadrants of Kolb's cycle. In Kolb's terminology “Activists” feel and do, “Reflectors” feel and watch, “Theorists” watch and think and “Pragmatists” think and do. From the educator's point of view, it is important to design learning activities that allow for effective student engagement in learning based on their preferred quadrant. Unfortunately, although it is often quoted and easily understood, the learning style inventory developed from the Kolb cycle has poor reliability and validity (Coffield et al., 2004).

In her results she found that not one of the four measures she tested worked the way they were intended to, as in they did not measure the aspects of students' learning styles that they claimed to. Kolb's claims on learning styles were also scrutinised by Geller (1979) who suggested that it failed to distinguish between learning styles of individuals or even large groups. This finding was also made by Geiger et al. (1992). The overall criticism of learning style theory stems from the claim by many educational researchers that the approach does not account for the conditions that influence someone to choose a particular learning style. The main assertion of the theory is that an individual will have one learning style, whereas in reality, when faced with different situations, learning environments and educational experiences that style would potentially change. Therefore, learning style cannot be claimed to be fixed.

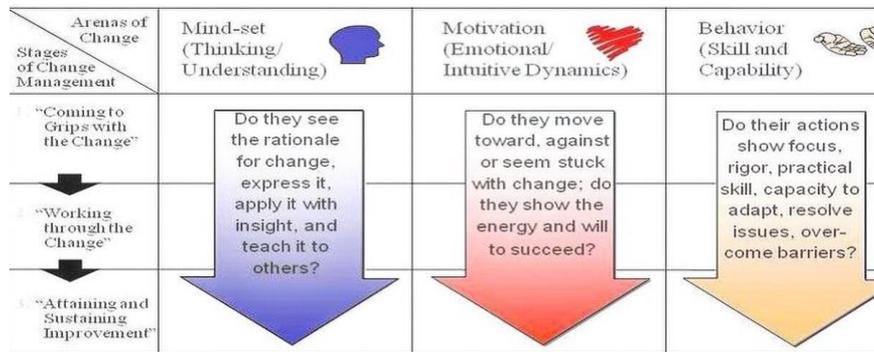
From these criticisms it is clear that learning is a complex process. A more comprehensive perspective on learning is proposed by Singleton (2015), as described in the following section. The Head, Heart and Hands Model was conceptualised from a synthesis of diverse literature including transformative learning theories, learning styles and experiential learning. Thus, in the context of this research, the model provides a means of integrating the theoretical foundations of transformative learning with broader learning styles to facilitate a more holistic exploration and understanding of mature student learning theory.

### ***2.7.1 Head, Heart and Hands Domains of Learning***

Singleton (2015) identifies three main domains of learning; cognitive (what we know), affective (what we feel) and psychomotor (what we do). This is more commonly referred to as head, heart and hands, which is essentially an abbreviation of engaging cognitive, affective and psychomotor learning domains, also referred to as thinking, feeling and doing (Bloom, 1995). Head, heart and hands is a holistic approach to learning developed by Orr (1992) and expanded on by Sipos, Battisti and Grimm (2008). These domains are shown in Figure 2.2 below. The model demonstrates the holistic nature of the transformative experience and relates the cognitive domain (head) to critical reflection, the affective domain (heart) to relational knowing and the psychomotor domain (hands) to engagement. Through deep engagement, reflection and relational understandings, mature students find personal meaning and relevance in learning that adds significance and purpose to their education. These educational experiences can therefore be transformative by bringing a new perspective to the relationship between the mature student and their environment. This, in turn, can enhance the mature student's acceptance of and attitude

towards the personal growth that can result from learning (Tooth & Renshaw, 2009), as shown in Figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.2 Head, heart, and hands (HHH) domains of learning**



*Source: Singleton, 2015.*

The Head, Heart and Hands Model illustrates the holistic nature of transformative learning. It relates the cognitive domain (head) to critical reflection; the affective domain (heart) to relational knowing and the psychomotor domain (hands) to an analytic tool for measuring transformational experiences. Successfully managing change requires attention to the challenges and questions that arise in each domain. In order to achieve transformative learning, a mature student must experience change in all three domains. This means that when a full-time mature student encounters an unfamiliar experience, he or she must first make sense of the situation in the context of how it compares to his or her other previous experiences. This results in some emotional response, which may demonstrate either a favourable or unfavourable attitude toward the new experience. The third and final stage is where the full-time mature student takes some action in response to how they feel towards their experience.

The head element of the model represents an alteration in an individual's mind-set and includes the rational-analytic side of change. It includes considering strategies that give rise to change and explores reasons why change is necessary and the potential benefits that may arise from making changes. Heart represents the motivational and emotional arena. Here, consideration is given to how individuals feel about making changes in their lives including the identification and evaluation of any sacrifices that may be involved.

The third element of the model, hands, involves acquiring the specific skills and capabilities to carry out the new practices or processes. The core challenge of the hands component of the model is to understand the behaviours necessary to implement the new strategy as well as identify those old practices that are inconsistent with new aims and goals and learn to block them. It is in this element that formal education can be of most obvious benefit. Learning new skills and ways of dealing with situations is a fundamental part of their learning experience for many students and in particular for full-time mature students in their first encounter with higher education.

The integration of head, heart and hands (thinking, feeling and doing) is suggested by Singleton as being useful in illustrating how transformative learning can take place. For example, a full-time mature student may *think* that they will be unable to cope with their study workload. This thinking may result in *feelings* of anxiety and apprehension, which in turn, may either influence their decision to take *action* by working as hard as they possibly can in college, or indeed not to put any effort into their studies on the basis that they believe that they are going to fail, regardless of how hard they try to succeed. Indeed, those students who maximise their study efforts may also find themselves putting extra emphasis on other aspects of their lives, such as their familial relationships.

This Head, Heart and Hands Model will inform the research methodology applied in this study as described in Chapter 3, as well as the findings in Chapter 4 and their discussion in Chapter 5. The final section of this chapter provides a summary of the key elements of this literature review.

## **2.8 Summary**

Mature student learning may be understood as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996a, p. 162). The reasons provided by mature students in the literature for choosing to return to full-time education are discussed in this chapter. This allows for the categorisation of students.

This literature review also provided an explanation of the evolution and development of a range of adult learning theories including Andragogy, Constructivism and Transformative Learning

Theory, which forms a central focus of this research. The exploration of these theories takes into account the fact that mature students have multiple learning experiences that help them to have a broader frame of reference and make meaning of knowledge.

Additionally, the literature review identified and discussed factors that encourage transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students, as well as a number of challenges which are predominantly faced by mature students returning to full-time higher education. As part of a broader consideration of transformative learning, the Head, Heart and Hands Model of Transformative Learning is presented in the context of the various learning styles which may be applied by mature students. This model illustrates the argument that in order for recognised transformative learning to have taken place, the changes experienced and implemented by the mature student must involve a combination of thinking, feeling and doing.

The next chapter provides an extensive description of the methodology applied in the primary research element of this research. The various stages of the transformative learning process identified in this chapter are used as the basis for exploring actual learning experiences of a large number of full-time mature students from the current constituent colleges of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research study is to examine the transformative learning experiences described by mature students in a number of Irish Institutes of Technology. This is done using mixed methods research. In this chapter, the approach adopted in this research is identified and explained. This is followed by a detailed exploration of the research design used. Then data collection procedures applied in this research are examined. The data preparation and analysis procedures used in this study are explained and finally a summary of the main sections of this chapter is presented.

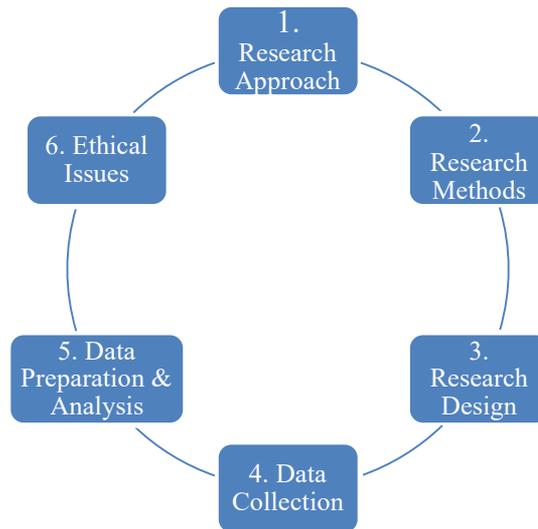
#### 3.1.1 Chapter Aims

The aims of this chapter are:

1. To explore the various research approaches which could be applied to mature student learning and discuss the selection made in the context of this research.
2. To identify, and explain the reasons for the choice of the research methods used.
3. To describe the research design applied to this study.
4. To examine how the data collection process will be undertaken.
5. To discuss the elements involved in preparing and analysing the data collected.
6. To explain the ethical issues involved in this research.

The next section of this chapter discusses the research approach that was applied to this study. This is followed by an in-depth consideration of the research design, methods and procedures used. Then, the data preparation, verification, coding and analysis are explored for each of the components of the research design along with the ethical issues involved. Finally, a chapter summary is provided.

The topics investigated in this research methodology chapter are shown in Figure 3.1, with the numbers denoting the order in which these topics are discussed in this chapter.

**Figure 3.1 Research Methodology Topics**

### 3.2 Research Approach

This research uses a mixed methods approach with the qualitative element involving direct quotations from a number of mature student research participants, which are then categorised quantitatively. Characterised by Creswell (2014) as an approach for exploring and gaining an understanding of the meaning that individuals or groups place on social or personal problems, qualitatively dominant research consists of an eclectic collection of approaches and methods used in several social science disciplines. Through these the researcher develops a "complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of participants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). This facilitates the researcher in making interpretations of the meaning of the data gathered, with the support of quantitative analysis, thereby making mixed methods research ideal for this research. Predominantly qualitative research studies, such as this, can provide a researcher with details about human behaviour, emotion, and personality characteristics, which are all central to this study. These are characteristics that quantitative studies cannot easily identify.

The goals of qualitatively-driven research are also multiple, depending on the purpose of the particular project and the disciplinary background. It is a type of scientific research which:

***Seeks to answer a question.*** The core question being answered in this research is "What are the transformative learning experiences as described by full-time mature students at the three constituent Institutes of Technology within the CUA?"

***Systematically utilises a pre-defined set of methods to answer the question.*** There will follow a detailed exploration of a wide range of methods which could have been used in this research and rationale provided to explain the methods chosen.

***Collects evidence.*** Using a variety of data collection tools, data was collected from a large number of full-time mature students attending colleges of the CUA.

***Produces findings that were not determined ahead of time.*** Since the findings from this research were identified from responses provided by research participants, they could not have been pre-empted or identified in advance of the research.

***Produces findings that are pertinent past the immediate boundaries of the research.*** The findings from this research have implications not only for full-time mature students within other Institutes of Technology, but potentially other categories of academic institution both in Ireland and abroad.

Moreover, research such as this, with a qualitatively-driven component attempts to explain a given research issue from the viewpoints of the targeted respondents it includes. In this research context, the views on transformative learning among full-time mature students were sought from the students themselves.

Strengths of qualitatively-dominant research include:

1. It incorporates the human experience. Human experiences can cause two people to view the same event in two different ways. By using qualitative research, which is categorised quantitatively, it is possible to incorporate this type of data into conclusions.
2. It has flexibility. There is no rigid structure to the qualitatively-driven research process. Rather, it seeks authentic data and emotional responses.
3. It offers predictive qualities. People who have similar perspectives will have similar thought patterns.
4. It allows for human instinct to play a role. The qualitatively-driven research process followed in this research allows for human instinct to play a role. The subconscious mind offers many secrets that may not be scientifically understood, but the data they produce can be collected. That data often has a higher level of accuracy and authenticity than any other form of data offered.

5. It can be based on available data, incoming data or other data formats. The dominance of qualitative research methods, as applied in this research, does not require a specific pattern or format for data collection.

6. It allows for detail-oriented data to be collected. Instead of focusing on a specific metric, qualitative research focuses on data subtlety. It requires as many details as possible and it is within these, with the aid of quantitative data analysis, that genuine insights tend to be found.

It is important to identify key disadvantages of predominantly qualitative research. These research processes do not provide statistical representation. I have undertaken a number of previous solely qualitative research studies and learned from the challenges faced in those to enhance the value of this research. It can be difficult to replicate results. As the parameters of this research have been clearly identified as the three current constituent colleges of the CUA, this limitation is not relevant to this research. It can be influenced by researcher bias. The design of this research was based on well-respected researchers in the area of transformative learning. In addition, the anonymity afforded to respondents minimised the potential impact of researcher influence. It creates data that is difficult to present. While the data could be examined quantitatively to identify prevalent concepts, it could not be statistically analysed. However, this was not the objective and it achieved the aim of providing insights into mature students' thoughts. Finally, the criticism of predominantly qualitative research that it has no rigidity and is based on individual perspectives is one of the characteristics that makes it ideal for this research, since these are what is being sought in this research. Ultimately, with the support of quantitative data analysis, these criticisms of qualitative research do not adversely affect its suitability or appropriate use in this context.

From an epistemological standpoint, this research involves an awareness of certain aspects of reality in terms of the sources of individual's beliefs as well as the extent of their knowledge. These are initially derived from literature in the previous chapter and then examined in conjunction with the views expressed by research participants through primary data collection with the ultimate goal of discovering what is known and how it is known. As such, epistemology is a useful method for evaluating the world around us and provides a core element of this research.

The next section of this chapter provides an overview of the most commonly applied qualitative data collection methods as described by Trochim (2016). Following characterisation of each method, justification for its inclusion or exclusion from this research is provided.

### 3.2.1 Qualitative Research Approach: justifying the choices made

The overview of qualitative data collection methods presented here is not an exhaustive list, but is a compilation of the most common methods in which researchers across multiple disciplines work. It is important to note that a number of these methods can be combined into one study, as described in this research.

*Ethnography:* This is the observation and documentation of social life in order to create an account of a group's culture (Reeves, Peller, Goldman & Kitto, 2013). As elements of culture were not the key focus of this study, this method was excluded.

*Grounded Theory:* According to Konecki (2011), this is a methodology for meticulously analysing qualitatively-dominant data in order to understand human processes and to construct a theory. This method was not chosen due to the researcher's decision to adopt transformative learning theory, as the main interest was on students' transformative experiences of their learning, rather than on developing a new theory.

*Content Analysis:* This is the systematic examination of texts and visuals, media and artefacts to analyse both their latent and manifest meanings (Markel, 1998). Since this research is based on information provided directly from respondents, this method was not deemed suitable for this research.

*Poetic Inquiry:* This represents an emergent movement within qualitative research and describes the transformation of qualitative data or the expression of qualitative experience through poetic structures (McCulliss, 2013). This is an interesting approach, but it was not seen best matched to this research focus, and therefore this alternative was not used.

*Arts-Based Research:* This applies visual arts and other media and methods to sometimes collect and most often represent and present its findings (van der Vaart, 2018). This study uses an arts-based method, namely photo-elicitation.

*Evaluation Research:* This systematically examines people, programmes, organisations and/or policies to assess their quality, merit and effectiveness (Powell, 2006). This was not deemed a suitable option since the focus of this inquiry does not reflect the aims of this data collection method.

*Critical Inquiry:* This alternative represents carefully researched issues that analyse and reveal social injustices (Roof, Polush and Boltz, 2017). Social injustice issues affecting full-time

mature students were not the focus of this study albeit it is an interesting and important focus in its own right.

*Phenomenology:* This is the study of the nature and meaning of things. Phenomenology is most often a research approach that focuses on concepts, events or the lived experiences of humans (Smith, 2003). While this research does explore the lived experiences of mature students, it aims to attribute specific meaning to those experiences in relation to transformative learning. Therefore, this method was not considered further.

*Action Research:* This is conducted with the purpose of reflecting on one's own practices including the students that one teaches (Ferrance, 2003). This means teaching, or working collaboratively with participants to change their setting and circumstances for the better. Participants' lives and their social environments are critically examined. In this research context, the actual experiences as described by mature students from a number of colleges and disciplines are explored and critically evaluated in terms of their propensity to enhance the mature students' prospects of achieving transformative learning. However, since I did not lecture these students, this thesis cannot be described as action research.

*Mixed Methods Research:* This uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis for its studies (McKim, 2017). Initially, this research was not interested in quantifying mature students' experiences. However, due to the unexpectedly high response rate achieved in the reflective accounts research, it became clear that in order to provide an additional level of data analysis and do justice to the responses received, a mixed methods research approach would best suit in this context.

This exploratory and interpretative qualitatively-driven study provides background information through which the transformative learning experiences of the full-time mature student research participants can be contextualised.

In the following section, I explore the various research methods that could be used in this research, identify those chosen and explain the reasons for the choices made in the context of the research design.

### 3.3 Research Methods

Due to the geographical distance between the three participant colleges it was important to identify research methods that could be applied to a large number of full-time mature students, without direct access to or contact with the respondents.

The data collection methods applied in this research are predominantly qualitative and the primary function of the quantitative element is to identify the dominant issues relating to transformative learning, as described by respondents. The main benefit of qualitative research for this study on transformative learning among mature students is that the information is richer and provides a deeper insight into the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research data collection methods are frequently time consuming, due to the level of in-depth analysis required. Data is usually collected from a smaller sample than would be the case for quantitative approaches.

The following section explores a variety of data collection methods that were initially considered for use in this research. Some of the most commonly applied main methods for collecting qualitative data are presented with the approaches adopted in this study bolded:

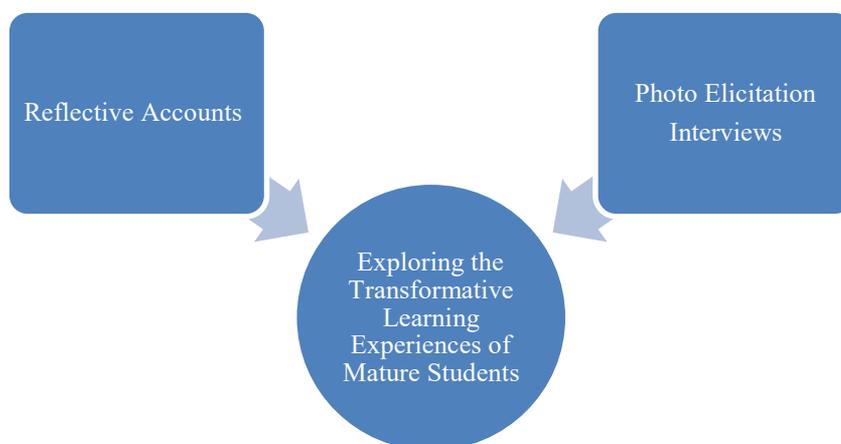
- i. *Focus Groups*: This option is often used when it is better to obtain information from a group rather than individuals (Harding, 2013). However, of necessity, this research involves obtaining the views of individuals independently and as a result, this alternative was eliminated.
- ii. *Observation*: This involves the researcher taking detailed notes of what is happening in a particular context (Kawulich, 2005). Due to the geographical distance between the research sites and the necessity of ensuring that no actions were to be taken that might influence the responses provided, this option was eliminated.
- iii. ***Reflective Accounts***: Reflective accounts are personal reflections of events. This is very similar to a diary entry in that it is a reflective piece in which the individual thinks about events and their potential and actual impact on their lives. They have the advantage of creating transparency in the research process, and explore the impact of critical self-reflection (Jasper, 2005). Due to the geographical distance between groups of mature students in each of the three colleges and the necessity to minimise their disruption during term time, an on-line reflective account was used in this research.

- iv. **Photo-elicitation Interviews:** This is a method of interview that uses visual images to elicit comments. The types of images used can include photographs, video, paintings, cartoons, and advertising, among others. Either the interviewer or the subject may provide the images. Interviews conducted as part of the photo-elicitation option can be structured or semi-structured (Harper, 2002). Using photo-elicitation in conjunction with semi-structured personal interviews to create classical interview analysis using images, makes a valuable contribution to both teaching and research, thereby making it an ideal enhancement for this research.

### 3.4 Research Design

Research design is defined as a framework of methods and techniques chosen by a researcher to combine various components of research in a reasonably logical manner so that the research problem is efficiently handled. It provides insights about “how” to conduct research using a particular methodology. A research design is used to structure the research and to show how all of the major parts of the research project fit together (Trochim, Donnelly and Arora, 2016). As shown in Figure 3.2 below, this research involved two key components: reflective accounts and photo-elicitation interviews. The role played by each of these in this research is explored in the following sections.

*Figure 3.2 Research Design*



The principal component of my primary research into transformative learning among full-time mature students within the Connacht-Ulster Alliance involved the development and dissemination of a reflective account, as described in the following section.

### ***3.4.1 Reflective Accounts***

Qualitative research comes from open-ended questions, instead of providing questions with only specific answers. The use of reflective accounts was ideal for this research since its aim was to gain insights into mature students' thoughts. A reflective account is a personal record of a mature student's learning experiences, both positive and negative (Stake, 2010; Hickson, 2016). It is a means by which a mature student can record and reflect upon their observations and responses to situations, which can then be used to explore and analyse their ways of thinking, that is, from an ontological perspective, reflective accounts provide mature students with a means to interpret their experiences in terms of their previous thinking and knowledge. In this research, the reflective account element is structured and interpreted in relation to the stages in the transformative learning process as described by Mezirow (2000) as experienced by full-time mature student research participants from the constituent colleges of the CUA.

In employing this method, the research explored how the mature student participants understood their college experience in terms of their broader life history. In addition, the reflective accounts examined the impact these experiences had on how these students constructed and viewed knowledge.

In the context of this research, an on-line reflective account was completed by students when writing about and considering their thoughts, "their presuppositions, choices, experiences and actions during the research process" (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, p.3).

A reflective account template was designed using Survey Monkey to be administered online. The statements presented to respondents were based on the 10 stages of the transformative learning process in line with the research question. They were asked to reflect on their experiences as they related to each of the ten questions and to provide as much detail as possible about their experiences of that particular transformative learning stage (see Appendix C). A period of three weeks was given to respondents during which they could consider and change their responses before submitting them indirectly to me through Survey Monkey. The template was designed to allow participants to record how their thought processes changed as they

progressed through the various stages of transformative learning using a relatively informal style of self-expression.

The questions were formulated using clear and unambiguous wording, which would not lead respondents to make specific comments. Sheehan (2001, p.1) argues that document length, respondent contacts, design issues, research affiliation and compensation are important features that can influence response rates. The reflective account was designed with these factors in mind. The account template structure was presented in a succinct manner and a clear layout was used in its design. My own affiliation to one of the participant colleges was declared in a cover letter distributed with the link to the reflective account. Finally, while no financial compensation was offered to participants for their contribution to the research, they were offered an opportunity to read the findings from the research once published.

Overall, using the 10 phases of Mezirow's transformative learning model, the use of reflective accounts allowed mature student respondents to provide detailed descriptions of their own personal experiences of transformative learning. In line with the research objectives, the initial question identified the triggers of transformative learning experiences. The objective here was to explore whether the triggers identified by the mature student research participants were similar to those identified in the literature, which included needing to up-skill to being unemployed or dissatisfied in their existing employment. Then the enablers of transformative experiences were investigated. According to the literature, these include eligibility for a return-to-education grant and a desire to changes one's life were identified as enablers. This was followed by an investigation of the obstacles encountered by mature students. Based on the transformative learning literature, these include uncertainty about personal capabilities. This element of the research was also designed to identify evidence of mature students having thought about their educational journey in advance. This was linked to feelings of anxiety and excitement for what lay ahead and this in turn resulted in the students taking action in the form of applying themselves to their study to the best of their ability. These elements relate to the application of the 3H model to mature students' transformative experiences.

The second element of the empirical research involved the use of photo-elicitation with personal interviews.

### ***3.4.2 Photo-elicitation Interviews: Image-based communication framework***

Photo-elicitation was used to test some of the key findings generated in the reflective account research with the main cohort of full-time mature students. In relation to this research, I have adopted a broadly interpretivist stance and use 'elicitation' to mean the process by which verbal discussion is brought about. That is not to state, however, that I treat images only as a prompt but rather, believe the value of these methods comes from the combination of the verbal and the visual and this in turn can assist the researcher from an ontological perspective when attempting to generate meaning from statements made by research participants about images.

Visual methodologies are a collection of methods used to understand and interpret images. These methods have been used for a long time in anthropology and sociology; however, they are a relatively new way to research for the majority of disciplines. Visual methodologies enhance the richness of data by discovering additional layers of meaning, adding validity and depth, and creating knowledge. Visual methodologies are used to understand and interpret images (Barbour, 2014) and include photography, film, video, painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, artwork, graffiti, advertising and cartoons. Elicitation using photographs, drawings, diagrams and artefacts is a broadly accepted and utilised technique in qualitative inquiry (Johnson and Weller, 2001). In its most basic form photo-elicitation is the use of photographs, irrespective of whether these are researcher-created, respondent-created or found, as part of a research interview to encourage research participants to share a view, an opinion or a response with the researcher, relating to a particular topic. In the context of this topic, the stages of the transformative learning process, as described by Mezirow provided the core topic of interest. The process of photo-elicitation was originally devised by John Collier and others in the mid-1950s. As argued by Collier (1967) "photographs are charged with psychological and highly emotional elements and symbols" (p.118). Photo elicitation interviewing has been used in a range of studies successfully (Mannay, 2013) including interviewing children where traditional verbal interviewing methods created limitations (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever & Baruchel, 2006). Researchers have also used photo elicitation to study social, racial and peer critiques in high schools (Thomas, 2009) and in a Maasai village in Tanzania, exploring the use and preservation of natural resources (Bigante, 2010), children, families, university students, farmers, substance abusers, medical illnesses of children, in the importance of clothing for adolescents, the work environment (Harper, 2002), in parents' accounts of long-term distress after the preterm birth of a child (Kantrowitz-Gordon & Vandermause, 2016), and in visual

autobiographies (Harper, 2002). In addition, photo elicitation interviews have been used for understanding meaning in people's lives in the field of psychology (Steger et al., 2013).

It is important to recognise photo elicitation as a novel approach to the study of transformative learning, and this provides the opportunity to provide a very clear contribution to knowledge. A primary reason for using photo-elicitation in this research was to empower respondents. Using the researcher's images in photo-elicitation could *“create a ‘bridge’ between the researcher and the mature student research participant that highlights different experiences of reality”* (Pink, 2005, p 69). Thus, photo elicitation provides a very valuable contribution to both teaching and research. A literature review conducted by Pain (2012) to evaluate the choice and use of visual methodologies found that visual methods enhance the richness of data and help with the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Data enhancement was achieved because it facilitated communication, enhanced rapport building, enabled the expression of emotions and tacit knowledge and encouraged reflection. This approach acknowledged participants as experts in their own lives, facilitated empowerment, and allowed for collaboration. Using visual methods to facilitate and enrich communication enhanced the data producing richer and a different kind of data than verbal methods (Pain, 2012). Thus, my primary goals in using photos in this research were to encourage dialogue and to generate useful insights and data.

Photo elicitation interviews can take three forms. In a participant-driven (open) approach, participants are asked, during the course of a pre-briefing, to collate photos which are relevant to a specific phenomenon under investigation. Using a participant-driven (semi-structured) approach, participants are asked to collate photos in respect of specific questions. However, due to the anonymous nature of this research, no prior contact was made with the research participants and all of the images were provided by the researcher, thereby using the third, researcher-driven, approach. This had the added advantage of allowing the process to proceed more rapidly, without compromising the quality of the data being collected. Caple and Knox (2015) state that they perceive a great potential to the development of "compelling stories through a sequence of images" (p.293). Thus, photo-elicitation is used in this research as a means of extracting from mature students their own personal 'stories' of transformative learning, thereby providing a very clear and valuable contribution to this research, which interviewing alone would not have achieved. As explained by Lackovic (2010), descriptions of

these experiences can be seen to surface while students create, explain in writing and then discuss the created images with other students as well as with lecturers.

Reflecting on the use of photo-elicitation, Collier (1957), argued that “pictures elicited longer and more comprehensive interviews but at the same time helped subjects overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interviews” (p. 858) and noted the technique’s “compelling effect upon the informant, its ability to prod latent memory, to stimulate and release emotional statements about the informant’s life” (p.858). It also encourages the participants and the researcher to reflect on the images and meaning behind them as they highlight an aspect or perspective of the research topic perhaps not previously considered (Mannay, 2010). There was significant evidence of these arguments in this research.

Images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words. Interactions based solely on words use less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. These may be some of the reasons that photo elicitation cannot be described as simply an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information, thereby making it suitable for this exploratory research (Lackovic, 2010).

Most elicitation studies use photographs, but there is no reason that studies cannot be done with paintings, cartoons, public displays such as graffiti or advertising billboards or virtually any visual image (Cowan, 1999). This statement formed the basis of my justification in using non-copyright protected web-sourced images.

In-depth interviewing in all its forms faces the challenge of establishing communication between two people who may have little in common. Photo-elicitation can help with this because it is based on a set of images that is understood, at least in part, by both parties. If the interview has been successful, the mutual understanding between the researcher and the participant should have increased through the interview process. In terms of positionality, I needed to be aware of my own potential influences both in terms of the images chosen and the discussions with research participants. However, the recording of responses and facilitating an open discussion with the full-time mature students on issues that were of concern to them facilitated a reduction in any influence that might have resulted from my own positionality.

Lackovic (2018) argues that finding channels where students' interpretations of the heard, seen and taught can be recorded might result in an enhancement of their learning experiences and

the broader learning process. Such an enhancement simply includes an exposure of the prior knowledge base (beliefs and constructs), or cognitive architecture (Zoethout & Jager, 2009) that connects to the on-going process of learning, so as to create a new perspective.

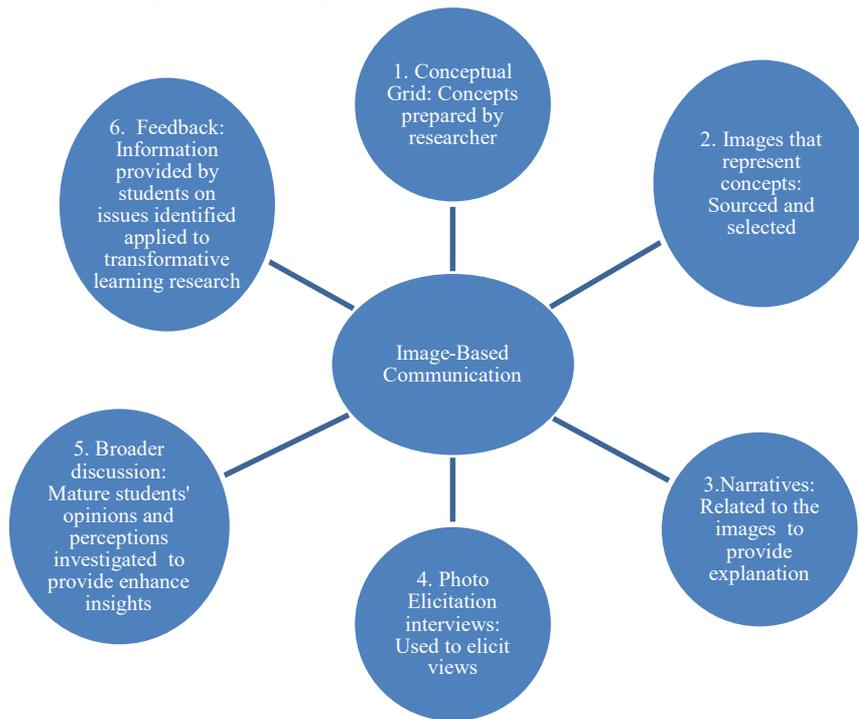
The use of images may provide students with new opportunities for prior experience to inform new ways of thinking in the course of their educational interactions. In such cases, when learning new concepts, students can form concept images related to concept definitions in their minds (Vinner, 1983). After a time, what remains is concept image rather than concept definition (ibid) although this might evoke concept definition. However, since many students prefer to verbalise their thoughts using words rather than images, this does not mean that all the students will necessarily form concept images in their minds.

As a potential middle-ground between verbal and image-based means of expression, the image-based communication framework, proposed by Lackovic (2018), encourages students to express how they understand a concept through an image accompanied by a short, personal, explanatory narrative. The framework is perceived as a potential tool for educators, students and educational policy makers, and comprises the following constructs:

- A conceptual grid of a lesson's concepts prepared by teachers
- Student (and/or teacher-)-chosen images that represent concepts
- Short narratives that explain images
- Blogs as repositories for students' images and narratives
- Discussion about images in pairs
- Image interpretation based on meaning making theories
- Peers' and teacher's feedback.

I have adapted this framework in the context of this research, as follows in Figure 3.3.

**Figure 3.3 Image-Based Communication Framework**



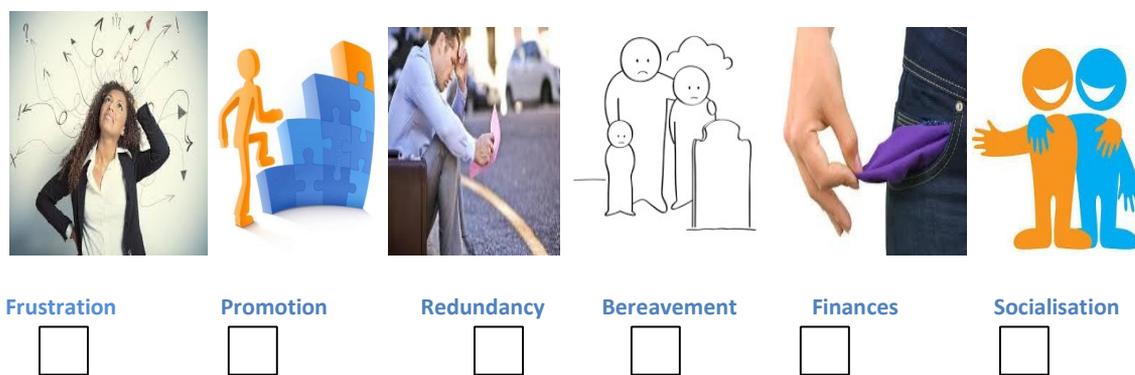
*Source: Adapted from Lackovic, 2018.*

1. The concepts for discussion in the photo-elicitation interviews are broadly identified by the researcher.
2. Images that represent the concepts under discussion are identified using non-copyrighted on-line image repositories.
3. Narratives relating to the images are provided to assist those mature students who have a preference for verbal explanations and reduce the likelihood of image misinterpretation by the research participants.
4. Interviews are conducted to elicit the views of mature student research participants.
5. Broader discussions on opinions and perceptions take place between the researcher and the mature student participants to gain more in-depth insights.
6. The information provided by the full-time mature student participants is then applied to this research.

It should be noted that some of the actions can be performed simultaneously, such as the discussion and image interpretation. Furthermore, this diagrammatical representation does not suggest links among its constituent elements.

For each of the stages in the transformative learning process as described by Mezirow, I undertook an internet search of key terms. I then used image repositories which were not copyright protected, for related images using terminology from each stage, as described in the literature. This avoids any potential copyright infringement issues. In stage 1, these key terms were *frustration, promotion, redundancy, bereavement, finances and socialisation*. In choosing particular images, in the case of each question, which represented a phase of transformative learning, I identified five possible images for each term, which I believed to be a clear representation of the term under investigation. I then sought the views of two colleagues who were known to me, but unfamiliar with this research. Subsequently, three mature students, who were selected randomly, were not known to me and were not au fait with this topic of study were asked for their views. Resulting from this process, I identified those images that most clearly depicted the terms being studied and these were used in this research. Figure 3.4 below shows the images chosen for use in phase 1 of the transformative learning process using photo elicitation. These, and the images used in the photo elicitation interviews to represent the remaining phases of transformative learning, are presented in Appendix D.

**Figure 3.4 Sample of Images Used in Photo Elicitation Interviews**



Respondents are asked to place the number 1 in the box beneath the term which best reflects their primary reason for returning to full-time higher education.

Terms used in phase 2 were *no role, complacency, under-qualified, work disputes, boredom and subject interest*. In stage 2, using the numbers 1-6, mature students are requested to identify

which option best and least reflected their opinion. Phase 3 involved the terms *feeling inadequate, rote learning, too old, isolation, new technology and affordability*. This required respondents to rank their views, with 1 being the strongest and 6 reflecting the weakest view. Phase 4 explored levels of perceived shared experiences and incorporated a continuum of *strong shared experience, limited shared experience, don't know, limited different experience and no common experience*. This stage only required mature students to identify the most important factor, by placing the number 1 in the box below the relevant image. For phase 5, the focus was on levels of confidence, with the options *still very confident, more confident than before, no change, less confident than before and still lacking confidence*. The requirement here is for research participants to identify the opinion with which they could best relate, using the number 1. Phase 6 explored the research participants' levels of organisation and included the alternatives *far more organised, slightly more organised, no difference, slightly less organised and far more disorganised*. This phase requires respondents to identify the single most important descriptor, using the number 1. In phase 7 the objective was to explore the knowledge and skills research participants needed to make changes in their lives. Included here were the terms *time management, organisational skills, determination, focus and teamwork*. In this phase, mature students are asked to rank the elements from 1-5, where 1 is perceived as the most important and 5 is viewed as the least important. Phase 8 explored possible new roles that the respondents might be interested in pursuing. These included *leader, subject expert, 'you' manager, and same as before*. For this phase, mature students are asked to identify which career path they believe they are most likely to pursue by placing the number 1 below the image reflecting the most likely option and the number 5 beneath the least likely alternative. In phase 9 the focus was on levels of competence and how respondents felt these had changed as a result of their decision to attend college full-time. Alternatives provided here were *far more competent, slightly more competent, no difference, slightly less competent and far less competent*. This stage explores the respondents' perceptions of their own level of competence and whether attending college has changed this. Their requirement here is to place the number 1 beneath whichever option best reflects their view. Finally, phase 10 explored ways in which respondents had reintegrated their newly-acquired skills into their lives. Categories here included *family life, social life, work, learning and health*. In this final element, research participants are again asked to rank, in order of importance, using the numbers 1-5 the factors they deem to be of most importance.

As part of the photo-elicitation process, I conducted interviews with this group. These were undertaken to expand on the issues identified by their choices of image. When developing an interview protocol, I used simple language and did not in any way lead the participants to provide any pre-determined responses. In addition, due to the sensitive nature of some of the topics being discussed, I asked the research participants not to identify themselves and I assured them that they were free not to provide an answer to any question, should they so wish. I also explained to each research participant that he or she had the choice to withdraw from the research at any time without explanation and that should such a situation arise, any and all information provided by them would be destroyed and would not be included in the research findings.

Photo-elicitation interviews were used in this research to corroborate the views expressed in the reflective accounts with those expressed in the photo-elicitation interviews. I chose to apply photo-elicitation to only one of the colleges. In examining the responses received from the reflective accounts of mature students from all three colleges and based on the commonalities between the colleges identified in the study context, I established that the similarities among potential responses provided by the photo-elicitation interviews across the colleges would be significant enough to justify focusing solely on full-time mature students in GMIT. Thus, within this college, I used photo-elicitation on a random sample of 30 full-time mature students. A copy of the photo-elicitation document I used, incorporating the images chosen, is provided in Appendix D.

In the photo-elicitation document, a very simple colour scheme was chosen and standard fonts were used so as not to provide a distraction to participants. A total of 10 questions were asked in the photo-elicitation interview, based on each of the 10 stages of the transformative learning process as described by Mezirow. A time limit of 30 minutes per respondent was placed on the interview schedule. This was to ensure that ample time was given to each interviewee to state their opinions, while also reducing the possibility of participants becoming bored and not engaging fully with the topics under discussion. This strategy achieved these desired objectives.

Table 3.1 summarises the research design used in this study and the numbers of participants.

**Table 3.1 Summary of Research Design**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Research method tool</b>	<b>Institution 1 participant number</b>	<b>Institution 2 participant number</b>	<b>Institution 3 participant number</b>
To what extent do full-time mature students report transformative experiences as described in the literature?		Reflective Accounts	234	135	222
		Photo-elicitation Interviews	30	N/A	N/A
What enables such experiences?		Reflective Accounts	234	135	222
		Photo-elicitation Interviews	30	N/A	N/A
What are obstacles to having such experiences?		Reflective Accounts	234	135	222
		Photo-elicitation Interviews	6	N/A	N/A
How does the Head, Heart and Hands Model help conceptualise full-time mature students' experiences?		Photo-elicitation Interviews	6	N/A	N/A

The following sections describe the data collection procedures used in this research, in addition to examining how the research participants were selected and discussing the response rates that were achieved.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedures**

The first data collection element involved a reflective account. This was followed by photo-elicitation interviews.

### ***Reflective Accounts***

Using an emailed version of the letter provided in Appendix A, I contacted the Registrar's Office in each of the three Institutes of Technology outlining the purpose of the research and requesting their assistance in contacting all of their full-time mature students with an invitation to participate in this research. All of the full-time mature students in each college were identified by the I.T. function within each of the constituent colleges of the CUA using full-time mature student mailing lists. The Registrar's Office of each college then emailed an explanatory letter I had supplied to each full-time mature student on the electronic mailing list. The Sample Research Participant Letter, shown in Appendix B, which was sent to all full-time mature students in each college, outlined the purpose of the research and the reasons why their participation was being sought. As it was not necessary for me to contact any student directly, this maintained the ethical boundary necessary for this research and eliminated any possibility of bias on my part when examining the comments made by the research participants.

#### ***3.5.1 Selection of Participants***

This section describes how potential research participants for the reflective accounts and photo-elicitation were identified.

### ***Reflective Accounts***

The reflective account was targeted at all of the full-time mature students in each of the three Institutes of Technology. This meant that if any particular student was registered as a full-time mature student within their institute of technology, then they were on the mailing list for the link to the reflective account. However, there were a number of reasons why a full-time mature student may not have participated in this research, despite having been invited to do so. Firstly, he or she may simply have chosen not to participate for personal reasons. These may range from lack of available time to apathy. Secondly, he or she may not have received the invitation e-mail if their college mailbox was full. Thirdly, technological issues such as poor internet connection may have prevented his or her participation. Additionally, he or she may not have been using their college e-mail account at all.

Despite these potential issues, I determined this to be the optimal manner of distribution of the reflective account link to all registered mature students in the three participant colleges. A sample of the reflective account document supplied to all potential research participants is shown in Appendix C.

### *Photo-elicitation Interviews*

In the interests of research validity, I selected a random sample of mature students from one of the participating colleges and used photo-elicitation interviews to confirm the findings from the reflective account. As the institute I chose was the one in which I am currently employed, this avoided time being spent travelling long distances and also eliminated the potential inconvenience for students of having to take time away from their studies to answer any further questions and participate in an interview. I personally approached a random sample of 30 full-time mature students in different locations across one of the Institutes of Technology. In order to avoid any potential bias or influential personal opinions about these individuals, I ruled out students who were known to me or who were my students and therefore my selection criteria were that these were students within the institute who were unknown to me and who were not my students. The only pre-requisite information I sought from them was confirmation that they were full-time mature students of GMIT. Once this was confirmed, I outlined my objective in seeking their views by explaining that I was undertaking doctoral research on the experiences of mature students who had returned to full-time third-level education.

They were then asked to participate in a personal interview in which their views would be recorded and explored further. I arranged to meet each of the students at a mutually suitable time, in an office which was located away from crowded areas in order to avoid noise pollution. All of the students I approached verbally agreed to participate. At the start of each interview, I asked each participant to complete a hard copy of the photo-elicitation document shown in Appendix D along with an informed consent form, as illustrated in Appendix E.

Then the interviews took place, as arranged. In the interests of anonymity, no names or student ID numbers were used during the interview which might identify the participants and possibly compromise the openness and honesty they displayed in their responses. They were asked to choose whichever image best represented their views at each of the stages of the transformative learning process. Each interviewee was limited to 30 minutes in terms of the time they were given to express their views and inevitably some students' interviews were longer or shorter than others. The average duration of the 30 interviews conducted was 24 minutes. Each participant was also asked if they had anything further they wished to add to their comments at the end of the interview and if they had additional comments, these were included in their responses. To explore the application of the Head, Heart and Hands Model of transformative learning to this research, I randomly selected 6 of those identified for participation in the photo-

elicitation element of the research and applied their responses relating to thoughts, feelings and actions to the model.

All of the interviews conducted were voice recorded electronically, with the consent of the participants. This allowed me to transcribe fully and accurately all of the views expressed by each mature student after the interview process had ended. Such recording also enabled the verification of the views expressed. All of the recorded material was encrypted and electronically stored in order to ensure there was no unauthorised access to the data. The recordings are currently being stored in a secure location and upon completion of this research, the data will be destroyed.

Due to the fact that respondents were contacted by their own college's Registrar's Office through its I.T. Department, no pre-notification of the research was given to the full-time mature students. This would not have served any useful purpose due to the anonymous nature of the research and the lack of preparation needed by respondents to answer the questions posed.

### ***3.5.2 Response Rates***

In this research, identifying the response rate only applies to the reflective account element, since the photo-elicitation involved a random sample of 30 mature students chosen from one of the participant colleges.

Using an online reflective account which I created using Survey Monkey, I collected a total of 166 reflective accounts from students across the three colleges. According to the figures provided by each of the three participant colleges, there were a combined total of 561 full-time mature students registered during the period of January to March 2017, when the data was being collected. Thus a response rate of 28% was achieved, which was deemed acceptable and indeed high in comparison to other online response rates. Due to the anonymous nature of the research and the fact that the link was distributed to all of the full-time mature students in all three colleges simultaneously, it was not possible to determine precisely which responses originated from any specific college. Had this been possible, the anonymity of the information gathered might have been seriously compromised.

### **3.6 Data Preparation, Verification, Coding and Analysis**

This stage involves a number of key tasks the first of which is to prepare the data that was collected. This data must then be verified, coded and analysed. Finally, the ethical considerations involved in this stage are explored. Each of these elements is discussed in the following section.

#### ***3.6.1 Data Preparation***

Access to the online reflective account was facilitated for a period of three weeks in all of the institutes. After this time period had elapsed, all of the responses received to the reflective accounts were gathered together. The initial task in data preparation involved identifying any incomplete records. While in many surveys incomplete responses might be discarded, in this research, I was interested in the comments made by respondents and so all responses were considered relevant. Another important check was made to ensure that contradictory information was not provided. No evidence of this was found.

All of the full-time mature students involved in the photo-elicitation element of this research provided responses to every question posed in the photo-elicitation interview. The design of the photo-elicitation document eliminated the possibility of response patterns materialising, such as always ticking the middle box where a number of alternatives were provided.

#### ***3.6.2. Data Verification***

Another key element of the data preparation process involves verification of the data. In relation to the reflective accounts, aside from having personally received the responses through Survey Monkey, it was not possible to authenticate the reported experiences themselves. However, since the full-time mature student research participants were anonymously reporting their own personal experiences, it must be assumed that their descriptions are a true reflection of those experiences. Furthermore, in the context of the reflective account, there are nuances that cannot be put into words, elements such as tone of voice, use of pause or change of posture. Heidegger (1962) discussed this difficulty as being like symptoms of an illness, "certain occurrences in the body which show themselves and which, in showing themselves 'indicate something which does not show itself" (p.52).

In the photo-elicitation element of the research, because the nuances including research participant's mannerisms and tones of voice could be witnessed first-hand and the assurances

of anonymity I provided, it was possible to verify that the information being provided by the research participant was a true reflection of their views.

### ***3.6.3 Data Coding and Analysis***

The following section presents a description of the data coding and analysis that was undertaken in this research using reflective accounts and this is followed by an explanation of my analysis of the photo elicitation interviews.

#### ***Reflective Accounts Coding***

As described by Saldaña (2014), "coding is just one way of analysing qualitative data, not the only way. There are times, when coding the data is absolutely necessary, and times when it is inappropriate for the study at hand" (p.40). In this research, coding was only applied to the reflective account responses and not to the photo-elicitation response analysis. Additional comments made by the full-time mature student research participants were used to reinforce the findings from the reflective accounts were provided as direct quotations and were therefore not coded.

Mezirow's 10 stages of transformative learning as applied in this research provided the themes to be communicated in this evaluation while also providing a structure for the pre-set elements of the coding scheme as follows:

1. Disorienting dilemma	2. Self-examination
3. Assessment of assumptions	4. Shared discontent
5. Exploration of options	6. Planning action
7. Knowledge and skills	8. Trying new roles
9. Competence and self-confidence	10. Re-integration

In this research, coding involved assigning a word or phrase which represents each of the phases of the transformative learning process. Since each phase is clearly distinguished in the structure of the reflective account, this facilitated coding. The structured approach adapted to the data collection process in this research also facilitated clear identification of the key issues to be analysed (Saldaña, 2013).

The following section discusses the data analysis applied in this research, firstly to the reflective accounts and then to the statements made by mature student research participants during the course of the photo elicitation interviews.

### ***Reflective Accounts Analysis***

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the approach to psychological predominantly-qualitative research that was used in this study. It has an idiographic focus, meaning that it aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon. In this study, the learning experiences of full-time mature students are explored in the context of their propensity to transform the individual's thinking and actions. The IPA method recognises the interpretative role of the researcher and thus the influence of my own personal attitudes and experiences on the interpretation of the data collected is acknowledged. However, every effort was made to ensure that a balanced and measured interpretation has been applied as described in recognised expert literature.

The analysis of qualitative research data, such as that gathered by the reflective account responses in this research is commonly known as narrative analysis. This involves aiming to uncover and understand a broader perspective, by using the data to describe the phenomenon, in this case, transformative learning, and what it means to the mature student respondents (Morse and Richards, 2002).

Many qualitative researchers, and I include myself among these, have discovered that human experiences can be shaped, transformed and better understood through verbal descriptions. Putting experiences into words, whether verbally or in writing transforms the experience into a more communicable representation. Therefore, the importance of verbal communication is not merely found in the words themselves, but in their potential to create shared understandings. Narratives, therefore, can be said to provide two perspectives. First is the realm of experience, where research participants describe their own personal experiences as they relate to transformative learning and secondly the realm of narrative means or devices which are used to make sense of the descriptions provided by the students (Patton, 2002).

No matter the chosen method, the process of analysis reduces the volume of text collected, identifies and groups categories together and seeks some understanding of it. In doing so, I try to stay true to the text (Downe-Wambolt, 1992; Morse and Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002 and Silverman, 2001).

As the qualitative researcher has no system for pre-coding data, a method of identifying and labelling or coding data is developed that is specific to this research, for the purposes of classification, summarisation and tabulation. In this research, content from the reflective accounts was analysed at a basic or manifest level. The objective of this level of analysis is to provide a descriptive account of the data, in other words, this is what the mature student respondents said, but not to provide any comments or theories as to why something was or was not said and how it was said.

Narrative analysis involves coding and classifying data, also referred to as categorising and indexing.

In undertaking this element of the empirical research, I followed the ten steps of narrative analysis, as described by Chenail (2011) which are:

1. Copy and read through the transcript highlighting any interesting or relevant information that is found. In this research, the stages of the transformative learning process formed the basis for each of the questions in the reflective account.
2. Go through the highlighted sections and list the different types of information found. This related to key terms used by mature students to describe their experiences at the various stages of the transformative learning process.
3. Read through the list and categorise each item. Initially all of the unique terms were listed. This resulted in the creation of a significant range of terms.
4. Identify whether or not the categories can be linked in any way and list them as major categories. From the initial long list of terms and concepts, terms with similar meanings in the context of this research were grouped together and subsumed under a common theme. This was done in order to provide more structure to the data and make its analysis more manageable and meaningful.
5. Compare and contrast the various major and minor categories. This was done in this research to ensure that there was a good link between the constituent elements of each category and the overall themes used in each stage of the transformative learning process.
6. If there is more than one transcript, repeat the first five stages again for each transcript. In this research, as there were 166 individual transcripts to be analysed, and so this proved to be a lengthy process.

7. When steps 1-6 have been completed for all transcripts, collect all of the categories or themes and examine each in detail to consider its fit into and relevance to the transformative learning process.
8. Once all the transcript data is categorised into minor and major categories or themes, review in order to ensure that the information is categorised as it should be. No changes were made in this research as a result of this stage in the content analysis process.
9. Review all of the categories and ascertain whether some categories can be merged or if some need to be sub-categorised. No changes to the data categorisation were made at this stage.
10. Return to the original transcripts and ensure that all the information that needs to be has been categorised. This resulted in no changes being made to the categories previously identified.

This process of content analysis proved lengthy and required that I go back over the data several times to ensure that I had analysed it thoroughly. The results from this process are described in Chapter 4.

The following section discusses the data analysis process followed with the photo elicitation interviews.

### ***Photo Elicitation Interviews Analysis***

In IPA, a good analysis is one which balances phenomenological description, which involves the use of Mezirow's phases of transformative learning as structural anchors for the discussion with research participants, with insightful interpretation of the images, as provided by the mature students. For this element of the empiricism, I chose to use content analysis, as this is a research method which is best suited to the study of communication artefacts including audio recordings and images, which were both used in this research. This method is widely used by social scientists to examine patterns in communication in a manner that was both replicable and systematic (Bengtsson, 2016). As the purpose of the photo elicitation interviews was to reaffirm and expand on the findings from the reflective accounts in a non-invasive manner, this was identified as the ideal method of data collection for this phase of the research. The application of codes, in a similar manner to those applied to the reflective account responses allowed for the identification of interesting and meaningful pieces of content, which expanded on the issues identified in the reflective accounts. The use of content analysis in this element

of the primary research addressed six key questions, as identified by Klaus Krippendorff (2008):

1. *Which data are analysed?* The data was derived from the photo elicitation interviews of mature students.
2. *How are the data defined?* The data was defined based on the 10 stages of Mezirow's transformative learning process.
3. *From what population are they drawn?* A sample of 30 respondents was randomly selected from one of the Institutes of Technology which formed the focus of this research.
4. *What is the relevant context?* The respondents are all full-time mature students who may have had transformative experiences as a result of their decision to return to full-time higher education.
5. *What are the boundaries of the analysis?* Due to the fact that this element of the research was conducted on only one of the three current constituent colleges of the CUA, there is no suggestion that the findings can be extrapolated to the wider Institute of Technology sector or the broader third level sector in Ireland or abroad.
6. *What is to be measured?* The photo elicitation interviews are designed to measure mature students' experiences of transformative learning, along with identifying advantages they may perceive they have over traditional school-leavers. In addition, the photo elicitation interviews identified disadvantages as well as challenges faced by full-time mature students. These are outlined in Chapter 4.

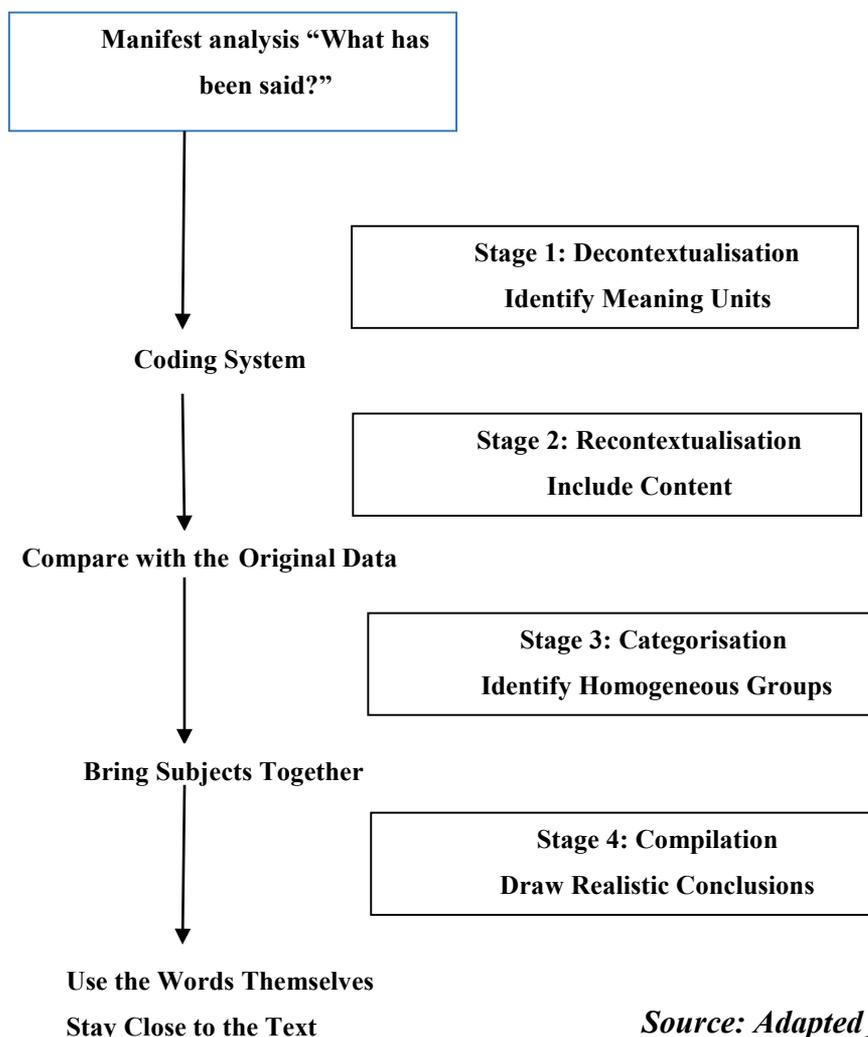
A common starting point for qualitative content analysis, which was used in this research, is transcribing the interviews. The objective in undertaking qualitative content analysis is to systematically transform large amounts of text into a highly organised and concise summary of key results. Analysis of the raw data from verbatim transcribed interviews to form categories or themes is a process of further abstraction of the data at each step of the analysis: from the manifest and literal content to latent meanings.

The initial step I took was to read and re-read the interviews to get a sense of the whole picture and gain a general understanding of what the full-time mature student research participants were talking about. At this stage, I was able to get ideas of the main points they were expressing. Then I started dividing up the text into smaller parts, namely, into meaning units. I was then

able to condense these meaning units further. While doing this, I needed to ensure that the core meaning was still retained. The next step was to label condensed meaning units by formulating codes and then grouping these codes into categories. Due to the fact that this research was based on Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning, I was able to use these as core themes. However, due to the further details and information provided by the research participants in my interviews with them, I also created a number of categories which did not form part of Mezirow's phases, which included the challenges facing mature students as they return to full-time higher education.

Figure 3.5 below was adapted from the work of Bengtsson (2016) and represents the process I applied to the content analysis in this research using manifest analysis, which by definition remains close to the text when analysing response content.

**Figure 3.5 Overview of the process of predominantly qualitative content analysis used in this research**



*Source: Adapted from Bengtsson, 2016, p.9.*

As in all predominantly qualitative analysis, content analysis is a reflective process. As such, it does not follow a linear progression from start to finish. This means that identifying and subsuming meaning units, coding and categorising are not events that tend to have a singular occurrence. In this research, content analysis was a continuous process of coding and categorising followed by a return to raw data to reflect on my initial analysis. This allowed me to question whether I was satisfied with my initial analysis and the coding units I used and make adjustments where necessary until I was satisfied that I had captured the level of detail I sought.

Having now discussed how the data in this research was collected, coded and analysed, the next section of this chapter outlines the ethical factors which needed to be considered when conducting this research into full-time mature students' experiences of transformative learning.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Since this research involved human participants, during its design phase, the research project specification was subjected to a rigorous ethical review by a committee from the Department of Education Research at Lancaster University. The primary aim of this process was the development of ethical researchers, as distinct from ethical research to ensure the well-being of all of the research participants and the researcher, to assess ethics and to promote ethical values (Lancaster University Ethics Code of Practice, 2009).

Since I am an employee of one of the participating colleges, the issue of role duality in this research also needed to be addressed. Insider action research is centred on the process whereby the action research is conducted by a full member of an organisational system, rather than by one who enters the system as a researcher and remains only for the duration of the research. Coghlan and Brannick (2015) emphasise that attention to the three core elements of insider inquiry – managing the tensions between closeness and distance (pre-understanding), organisational and researchers' roles (role duality) and managing organisational politics – are critical to effective insider action research.

As a consequence of being recognised as satisfying the criteria for being research, action research projects conducted in places, such as academic institutions, which are governed by formal sets of rules regarding ethical research conduct are required to demonstrate clearly how the research regarding ethical conduct are required to demonstrate clearly how the research

regarding ethical processes for collecting data from, about, and involving people, who these rules often refer to as 'human subjects'.

Attention needed to be paid to common ethical issues which arise as well as those which may be specific to the researcher, such as inadvertent identification of individual research participants, or those relating to the organisation or proposed project needed to be carefully considered. These can be associated with involvement, impacts and outcomes both on the researcher themselves as well as on participants, organisational and stakeholders, and these are all important considerations for researchers and academic supervisors as well as members of institutional review boards and human research ethics committees.

The integrity and expertise of the researcher is a central issue in insider action research the researcher's experience, values, ideas and choices and how these impact on the research were important considerations in this research.

Due to the fact that some of the data was collected from full-time mature students in GMIT, their Code of Conduct for Researchers (Academic Code of Practice, No. 5), which is part of the Research Ethics Policy governing all of GMIT's research activities was also applied in this research. This Code required that the research be conducted "in as conscientious and responsible a manner as possible" (p.22).

Every effort was made to adhere to the ethical research standards of both GMIT and Lancaster University, the reflective accounts element of this research. Due to the transition from a private to a more public sphere with the photo elicitation interviews, which involved face-to-face interactions with research participants, as part of the formal ethics procedure, I provided all of the mature students involved in the photo-elicitation interviews element of this research with a plain language statement inviting voluntary participation on the basis that consent to include information that had been provided could be withdrawn at any time. Research participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix E) and were told that they had the right to withdraw from the research whenever they wished. In doing so, my primary aims were that the views expressed by all of the research participants would be protected and that bias would not be shown towards the institution in which I am employed. For the reflective accounts, each participant college was guaranteed, in the form of an explanatory letter, that the mature student data provided to me by the research participants would be anonymous and therefore could not be used to identify individual research participants or provide a basis with which to compare and contrast institutions. Thus the focus remained on the individual full-time mature students'

experiences, irrespective of which institute they were attending. All data was gathered, stored and analysed in a secure setting. Online data was password protected and hard copies of the data and its analysis were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a secure office to which I alone had access and will subsequently be destroyed.

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter explores the research methodology applied in this study of the transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students within the constituent Institutes of Technology of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance. The first section presents an introduction to the research context. This is followed by an explanation of the decision to use reflective accounts and photo-elicitation. Next, the data collection procedures followed in this research were explored including the selection of research participants and response rates. This was followed by a description of the data preparation, verification, coding and analysis elements applied to this research. Finally, the ethical issues which were considered pertinent to this research were discussed.

In undertaking this research every effort was made to ensure that the research process was undertaken in a well-structured, ethical and fair manner. This allowed for information to be gathered which provided a true representation of the mature students' experiences. The findings from the research are presented next in Chapter 4, where minimal interpretation has been applied and these findings are discussed further in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative data that was gathered during this research. The primary focus of this chapter is on presenting the data in its raw form, before discussing it in Chapter 5.

In exploring the research findings, I am cognisant of the overall research question: *What are the experiences of mature students at three Irish institutes of technology with regard to transformative aspects of their learning?*

#### 4.1.1. Chapter Aims

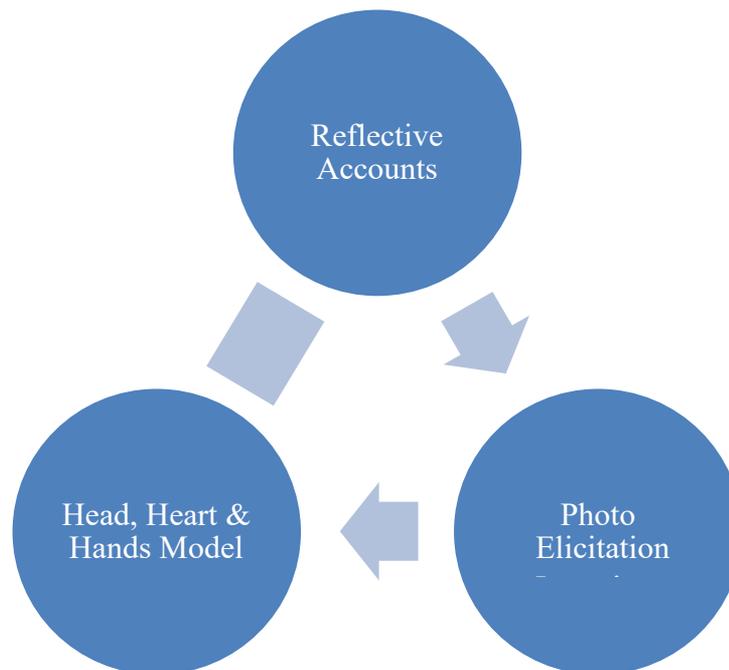
The aims of this chapter are, in accordance with research questions:

1. To establish, from the reflective account narratives, to what extent full-time mature students report transformative learning experiences.
2. To explore the external and internal barriers to higher education identified by full-time mature students in the findings from the photo elicitation interviews element of this research.
3. To explain the factors as described by mature students that enable transformative learning experiences.
4. To examine obstacles facing mature students to having such experiences.
5. To critically reflect on the findings presented in this research.

As the data from the reflective accounts and photo elicitation-based personal interviews with full-time mature students are anonymous. Direct quotations from participants are identified using their response number. As far as practicable, raw data is presented in this chapter with the findings more fully discussed in Chapter 5.

While some of the findings presented in this section substantiate existing knowledge, there are also findings that are unique to this research. These specific issues are discussed more comprehensively in Chapter 5.

The topics within which the findings are situated are shown in Figure 4.1.

**Figure 4.1 Findings' Components**

## 4.2 Main Findings

The next section explores the findings from reflective accounts of full-time mature students from these colleges. This is the first of two data collection methods used in this research.

### 4.2.1 Reflective Account Findings

This section aims to correlate mature students' reported experiences with phases of transformative learning, as described by Mezirow (1998b). This involves mapping their documented experiences against the phases of transformative learning.

In this research, the link to an online anonymous reflective account (see Appendix C) was distributed to all of the full-time mature students in each of the three colleges and the response rate for this element of the research was exceptionally high at 28%. This is as compared to an average response rate of 10-15% for many anonymous online surveys (Saleh & Bista, 2017).

Mezirow's 10 phases of transformative learning are used in the following section to structure the responses provided by full-time mature students in their reflective accounts. Each of these is described in turn and this is followed by an identification of the range of responses provided. A number of additional responses have been documented in Appendix F to illustrate the wide range of issues of concern to mature students using the themes applied in the following sections.

Table 4.1 below provides a summary of the key issues derived from the reflective account responses of mature students in this research. From these issues, a number of over-arching themes emerged which lent empirical weight to some of the key contentions of transformative learning theory. This table also identifies the percentage of research participants, of those who provided an answer, who specified each theme in their responses.

**Table 4.1 Summary of Key Issues & Over-arching Themes**

<i>Phase in the Transformative Learning Process</i>	<i>Key Issues Derived from Reflective Accounts</i>	<i>Over-arching Themes</i>	<i>Percentage of Theme Prevalence Among Respondents</i>
<b>1. Disorienting dilemma</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redundancy</li> <li>• Lack of opportunity</li> <li>• Unemployment</li> <li>• Changing personal circumstances</li> <li>• Career advancement</li> <li>• Self-improvement</li> <li>• Career change</li> <li>• Up-skilling</li> <li>• Future planning</li> <li>• Changing life direction</li> <li>• Changing perspective</li> <li>• Better work-life balance</li> <li>• Self-fulfilment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Unemployment</li> <li>➤ Lack of Opportunity</li> <li>➤ Changing Personal Circumstances</li> <li>➤ Self-improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 35</li> <li>▪ 30</li> <li>▪ 20</li> <li>▪ 15</li> </ul>
<b>2. Self-examination</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right time to go back to college</li> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• No option</li> <li>• What I did wrong</li> <li>• Self-examination</li> <li>• Self-doubt</li> <li>• Couldn't afford it before</li> <li>• Immaturity</li> <li>• Want to be a role model</li> <li>• Impact of illness</li> <li>• Lack of self-worth</li> <li>• Unfinished business</li> <li>• Changing personal circumstances</li> <li>• New experience</li> <li>• Undeserving of role</li> <li>• No more excuses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Right time to go back to college</li> <li>➤ Unfinished business</li> <li>➤ No option</li> <li>➤ What I did wrong</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 20</li> <li>▪ 30</li> <li>▪ 35</li> <li>▪ 15</li> </ul>
<b>3. Critical assessment of assumptions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heavy workload</li> <li>• Academic struggle</li> <li>• Lack of commonality with classmates</li> <li>• Study-life balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Heavy workload</li> <li>➤ Lack of commonality with classmates</li> <li>➤ Increased confidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 60</li> <li>▪ 25</li> <li>▪ 15</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unforeseen costs</li> <li>• Too old</li> <li>• Personal sacrifices</li> <li>• Financial implications</li> <li>• Negativity from younger students</li> <li>• Increased confidence</li> </ul>		
<b>4. Recognition of discontent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening to others helps</li> <li>• Goals vary</li> <li>• Engagement with environment</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Others cope better</li> <li>• Similar experiences</li> <li>• Building relationships</li> <li>• Asking questions in class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Listening to others</li> <li>➤ Goals vary</li> <li>➤ Engagement</li> <li>➤ Time management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 35</li> <li>▪ 20</li> <li>▪ 20</li> <li>▪ 25</li> </ul>
<b>5. Exploration of options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased confidence</li> <li>• More organised</li> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> <li>• Helping</li> <li>• Critical analysis</li> <li>• Increased drive</li> <li>• Awareness</li> <li>• Friendships</li> <li>• Openness</li> <li>• Task focused</li> <li>• Stress management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Increased confidence</li> <li>➤ More organised</li> <li>➤ Conflict resolution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 60</li> <li>▪ 30</li> <li>▪ 10</li> </ul>
<b>6. Planning a course of action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measured approach</li> <li>• Evaluation</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Detail focused</li> <li>• Organisation</li> <li>• Consideration</li> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Determination</li> <li>• Self-confidence</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Time management</li> <li>➤ Measured approach</li> <li>➤ Consideration</li> <li>➤ Self-awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 50</li> <li>▪ 30</li> <li>▪ 10</li> <li>▪ 10</li> </ul>
<b>7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time Management</li> <li>• Organisational Skills</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Skills</li> <li>• Discipline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Time management</li> <li>➤ Confidence</li> <li>➤ Communication</li> <li>➤ skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 40</li> <li>▪ 35</li> <li>▪ 25</li> </ul>

<b>8. Provisionally trying new roles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not yet considered</li> <li>• Same role</li> <li>• Different role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Not yet considered</li> <li>➤ Same role</li> <li>➤ Different role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 50</li> <li>▪ 20</li> <li>▪ 30</li> </ul>
<b>9. Building self-confidence and competence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Confidence</li> <li>• Competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Self-confidence</li> <li>➤ Competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 60</li> <li>▪ 40</li> </ul>
<b>10. Re-integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Happiness</li> <li>• Work-life Balance</li> <li>• Opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Confidence</li> <li>➤ Happiness</li> <li>➤ Work-life Balance</li> <li>➤ Opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 55</li> <li>▪ 15</li> <li>▪ 20</li> <li>▪ 10</li> </ul>

### ***Phase 1: Disorienting Dilemma***

A total of 13 distinct issues were recorded in response to this question. These were then categorised further with the use of overarching themes. This process reduced the initial number of unique issues identified by research participants in this phase to 4 as shown below.

#### **1. Unemployment**

A significant number of research participants identified losing their job or being unemployed as being the main motivations for them in deciding to return to full-time education.

*"My place of work was offering redundancies at the time."* (Respondent 17).

*"I was long-term unemployed and had completed all sorts of government schemes and they were getting me nowhere."* (Respondent 120).

#### **2. Lack of opportunity**

Those who left the education system without any recognised qualifications found it increasingly difficult to secure employment. Returning to full-time education gave respondents the opportunity to gain the necessary qualifications for their career advancement and investigate other career options. These research participants were primarily motivated by a desire for a new career path or direction.

*"Seeing others around me progress in career paths and being stuck."* (Respondent 91).

*"I wanted to have something extra to bring to an interview situation."* (Respondent 26).

*"I felt my career did not use all the skills I possessed."* (Respondent 28).

*"I changed industry 10 years ago and had no qualifications in the current industry."* (Respondent 44).

### 3. Changing personal circumstances

This category represents those who are positively influenced to change their lives based on the actions and achievements of others.

*"I went back to college as I had left work recently." (Respondent 130).*

*"I have kids and I would like to be able to provide for them and plan for our future." (Respondent 53).*

*"I became undecided and took a year out then I saw that this college had a number of good courses that suited me." (Respondent 57).*

*"I was always unsure of what I wanted to do in college until travelling on my own broadened my mind and I discovered what I wanted to do." (Respondent 60).*

*"When my daughter started college, I realised that she would be the first in our household to get a degree-level education. That inspired me to be next." (Respondent 103).*

### 4. Self-improvement

As individuals become older, corporate life becomes less important and their focus and priorities shift as they gain more of a balance between their working lives and personal lives.

*"I had a desire to improve myself, as in past employment I felt that because I had no third-level education, I was looked upon as not educated and my views were not taken seriously." (Respondent 27).*

*"I was in a job that I had no interest in or passion for anymore." (Respondent 63).*

*"I have always desired to study further, having been quite academic in school." (Respondent 82).*

#### ***Phase 2: Self-examination***

This involves dealing with feelings of guilt or shame and self-examination to explore what he or she did wrong and what he or she could have done differently. Respondents were asked to discuss their own role in the circumstances that led them to deciding to go to college as a full-time mature student. A total of 16 distinct issues were recorded in response to this question. These were then categorised further with the use of overarching themes. This process reduced

the initial number of unique issues identified by research participants in this phase to 4 as shown below.

### **1. Right time to go back to college**

For a number of respondents their primary motivation in returning to full-time education as mature students was to provide a good example to family members. Where ill-health affected an individual's life, while in college, their focus and priorities shifted from exploring course options in college to ensuring their own well-being.

*"Financially and time-wise, it was the right time to get back into education."* (Respondent 5).

*"My extremely poor health led me to drop out to get the help I needed. Feelings of being weak stopped me for 4 years, until I found a course that is perfect for me."* (Respondent 37).

*"I have carried around a chip on my shoulder that I should have completed a previous degree that I had dropped out of."* (Respondent 45).

*"As a young person, I was not motivated enough to study and looked at it as if I was not intelligent enough to learn."* (Respondent 27).

*"I returned to college for a new experience, to promote my confidence and belief in myself and my abilities."* (Respondent 69).

*"First time around, I allowed my husband of the time to stop me from going to college. Any other time I tried, excuses were found to stop me from going."* (Respondent 98).

### **2. Unfinished business**

The main motivation here is a desire to increase self-worth and reduce shame due to being without a formal academic qualification. For this category of mature student, there was a mismatch between their educational attainments and the job they were doing.

*"It was always unfinished business to complete my honours degree."*(Respondent 50).

*"Shame was a big part of it. I decided I didn't want to be the one that didn't have a college education among others. "* (Respondent 19).

*"I felt guilty that I was not putting my degree to use."* (Respondent 88).

### 3. No option

There is a group of individuals who realised that without formal academic qualifications they were destined to receive state financial support indefinitely.

*"I had no alternatives. I survive on state hand-outs." (Respondent 20).*

*"I struggled to be able to go to college before this, but now I can with the Back to Education grant." (Respondent 25).*

*" My relationship ended and I knew I had to learn to provide for my family and get a good job." (Respondent 54).*

### 2. What I did wrong

This response is reflective of younger mature students who recognised their mistake they are now trying to make amends and get their lives back on track.

*"College first time around was a bit of a party. This time I am more focused on the subject matter and doing well." (Respondent 112).*

*"I should have done it years ago. I am able for the work involved." (Respondent 107).*

*"I had low self-esteem and little to no confidence so decided to go back to college to gain a higher level of education and increase my confidence." (Respondent 122).*

### ***Phase 3: Critical Assessment of Assumptions***

Respondents were asked to explore what assumptions they made about their changed situation including their decision to go to college and whether or not, in hindsight, those assumptions were accurate and realistic once they made the decision to go to college as a full-time mature student. A total of 10 distinct issues were recorded to this question. These were then categorised further with the use of overarching themes. This process reduced the initial number of unique issues identified by research participants in this phase to 3, as described in the following section.

#### 1. Heavy workload

The necessity for full-time mature students to adapt to new experiences can result in feelings of being overwhelmed. Among those who expressed this opinion, the loss of financial security and personal time restrictions were the most significant factors.

*"I assumed it would add a huge workload and time to my already busy life and I was right, but it will be worth it in the long run."* (Respondent 6).

*"I assumed I would struggle academically. I was not really a school person when I was in secondary school. I couldn't have been more wrong."* (Respondent 47).

*"I thought it would be difficult to balance everything in my life and it has proved correct."* (Respondent 8).

*"Well, it's very challenging. It can be off-putting if you are a quitter, but some people, like me, aren't."* (Respondent 100).

*"I assumed it would be easy to give up everything and go back to college. But it's much harder than expected."* (Respondent 105).

*"I assumed there would be a considerable drop in income as a result of leaving a full-time job and it would be a bit of a struggle. I was surprised at how great that struggle actually was."* (Respondent 14).

## **2. Lack of commonality with classmates**

Some respondents voiced concerns that due to their age, they would have little in common with their classmates.

*"I assumed and accepted I wouldn't have much in common with classmates, however, that proved to be false."* (Respondent 15).

*"I assumed the class would be filled with teenagers that had just left secondary school, but I was wrong."* (Respondent 18).

*"My assumptions were pretty much correct. However, I did not expect the amount of negativity in regards to the coursework from the younger students."* (Respondent 66).

## **3. Increased confidence**

This comment highlights the fact that for many full-time mature students, returning to the classroom environment is just one element of their overall educational experience.

*"The assumptions I made would be that I would be more confident as a person and in my role at work. This was an accurate assumption."* (Respondent 95).

### ***Phase 4: Recognition of Discontent***

This phase explores respondents' recognition that their discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. Research participants were asked to examine whether they recognised that others may have gone through similar experiences and what, if anything, they learned from these others as a full-time mature student. A total of 10 distinct issues were highlighted from their responses to this question. These were then categorised further with the use of overarching themes. This process reduced the initial number of unique issues identified by research participants in this phase to 4 as described in the following section.

#### **1. Listening to others**

These comments reflect the willingness on the part of many mature students to work as a team to achieve common goals.

*"I feel listening to others and taking my own experiences into account, I have learned a great deal with various circumstances which can arise throughout college." (Respondent 4).*

*"Chatting at breaks we realised everyone was feeling the same uncertainty. It made things easier and everybody worked as a group to help and encourage each other." (Respondent 144).*

*"We shared similar problems as most of us struggled with family and work commitments as well as coursework." (Respondent 46).*

*"I learned I was not alone and developed strong relationships with other mature students." (Respondent 34).*

#### **2. Goals vary**

While full-time mature students share a common characteristic of being older than their traditional school-leaver classmates, they may have distinct educational objectives.

*"Most people are unskilled for similar reasons but with different goals in mind." (Respondent 6)*

*"I have difficulty believing in my own worth." (Respondent 137).*

### **3. Engagement with environment**

This shows that many mature students may be more focused on the broader environment of their education than may be the case for traditional school-leavers.

*"I always engage in what is going on around me, it helps to build a bigger picture of what you are up against and who is the 'Straight A' student." (Respondent 101).*

*"I spoke to other mature students about taking up teaching time and that as mature students we should not be answering all the lecturers' questions." (Respondent 56).*

### **4. Time management**

These comments highlight the fact that learning from the experiences of others can be positive or negative.

*"Yes, others have gone through similar experiences and yes, I have learned some lessons from them - time management." (Respondent 24).*

*"Most mature students on my course are in the same boat and are finding it difficult to get the necessary time as most have young families." (Respondent 126).*

## ***Phase 5: Exploration of Options***

This phase examines an individual's growth in confidence in how that person conducts him or herself in their interactions with others and in examining new ways of acting in and reacting to specific situations. Respondents were asked to examine whether, and if so, how, their new situation changed the ways in which they act and interact with others. A total of 11 distinct issues were recorded to this question. These were then categorised further with the use of overarching themes. This process reduced the initial number of unique issues identified by research participants in this phase to 3 as described in the following section.

### **1. Increased confidence**

Very many comments from full-time mature students reflected their increased feeling of confidence as a result of their decision to return to full-time higher education.

*"I feel I have definitely grown personally in that I am much better and more vocal when required in meetings. I gained confidence." (Respondent 1).*

*"It was a completely new area for me, but one that I took pride in and gained this new area of knowledge." (Respondent 42).*

## 2. More organised

Due to the broader range of commitments to be dealt with by some full-time mature students, they may develop better organisational skills.

*"I have more deadlines now, so I have to be more organised." (Respondent 3).*

*"I try not to think 'I cannot...' I focus on a task, if I don't know or don't understand, I ask, read, talk with others and ask teachers." (Respondent 75).*

*"I have learned a lot about managing my stress during the process and it also provided great insights into how I do my work." (Respondent 123).*

## 3. Conflict resolution

Full-time mature students take the time to explore perspectives and to question their actions. They often develop a more accepting approach towards others and their views.

*"In a cordial manner, I would approach the person involved and ask them if there was any issue or issues that needed resolving and try to formulate a solution." (Respondent 101).*

*"I have increased my critical analysis skills." (Respondent 33).*

*"I feel I am more open to people's individual goals and decisions." (Respondent 70).*

*"My self-awareness has developed a lot over the years. In addition, my awareness of others has also developed." (Respondent 48).*

*"Yes, it has changed me because it has made me want to help people if they need help and also made me ask for help if I needed it." (Respondent 16).*

### ***Phase 6: Planning a Course of Action***

This element entails making a definitive plan on how to improve one's situation. Respondents were asked to describe ways their behaviour had changed for the better as a result of their decision to go to college as a full-time mature student. A total of 13 distinct issues were recorded to this question. These were then categorised further with the use of overarching themes. This process reduced the initial number of unique issues identified by research participants in this phase to 4 as described in the following section.

### **1. Measured approach**

These comments are reflective of those full-time mature students who have learned to consider their options carefully without jumping into a particular course of action.

*"I definitely have a more measured approach to all situations."* (Respondent 124).

*"I evaluate the situation now as opposed to making a decision without thinking it through fully."* (Respondent 132).

*"Planning everything in detail and leaving nothing to chance when applying for jobs."* (Respondent 116).

### **2. Time Management**

This recognises that a range of factors must be considered when making plans or decisions.

*"I have to plan my time more concisely and remove distractions."* (Respondent 5).

*"Definitely more organised."* (Respondent 128).

*"College has taught me that you can create a balance between home, part-time work and study and still feel like you are living."* (Respondent 94).

### **3. Consideration**

In these comments, the respondents are showing that they are aware of the necessity to share classes with others including traditional school-leaver students.

*"I give more consideration to the feelings and circumstances of others."* (Respondent 125).

*"The act of attending college for me has elevated my life choices to befit my version of a 'successful' lifestyle. I have completely overhauled my life."* (Respondent 77).

### **4. Self-awareness**

Full-time mature students of a certain age may feel that their classmates do not appreciate their experiences.

*"I am more aware of getting older and of how society deals with ageism."* (Respondent 4).

*"I have learned how to deal with difficult situations."* (Respondent 55).

*"More confident. More aware of the issues facing young people nowadays and understanding of what is needed to be as helpful as possible to those I may work alongside."* (Respondent 156).

### ***Phase 7: Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills***

This stage involves gaining the knowledge and skills needed to make the changes identified as being necessary. Respondents were asked to describe the knowledge and skills they believe they have gained during their time in college as a full-time mature student. They were also asked to explain how they see this knowledge and these skills as being beneficial in helping them achieve their career and life plans and goals. These are presented as a range of knowledge and skill enhancements as expressed by a number of research participants. Time management, organisational skills, discipline, confidence and communication skills were the most prevalent responses. These were then categorised further with the use of overarching themes. This process reduced the initial number of unique issues identified by research participants in this phase to 3 as described in the following section.

#### **1. Time Management**

These comments illustrate the importance that mature students place on being able to effectively handle all of their commitments through time management.

*"Time management, confidence, and a good base knowledge of all aspects of the sector I work in."* (Respondent 154).

*"Structured approach, time management, dealing with people."* (Respondent 140).

*"I feel I am a better role model for my children and also for my peers, because if I am able to find time to study, I think anyone can."* (Respondent 150).

*"Drive, time management, experience, applying theory to practice."* (Respondent 142).

*"Time management, reflective writing, academic reading and writing, managing money."* (Respondent 40).

*"Juggling work, college and home is a great teacher for time management skills and also for confidence."* (Respondent 102).

*"I learn things more easily now as I am a much better listener."* (Respondent 19).

*"Studying, reading and researching. These are good lifelong skills and good for any career plans."* (Respondent 49).

*"My ability to focus on projects."* (Respondent 81).

*"Discipline. The knowledge that deadlines have to be met and there is an enjoyment and sense of satisfaction in achieving these deadlines."* (Respondent 83).

*"It broadens your horizons and requires you to become more adaptable and to better cope with change."* (Respondent 127).

*"Patience, tolerance, ambition, determination. As a mature student, I handle stressful situations better than I would have done when I was younger."* (Respondent 92).

*"Together with technical modules, college taught me how to think, be patient and professional."* (Respondent 105).

## **2. Confidence**

Mature student respondents identified a significant number of ways in which their confidence had increased as a result of their decision to return to full-time education.

*"I'm more open-minded to new people and learning to work together in group projects is very important to build up my confidence. Being focused on goals is also good training."* (Respondent 122).

*"Patience. Ability to accept criticism, but being able to stand up for what I think."* (Respondent 35).

*"I feel I can take more responsibility at work. Confidence to do new work properly."* (Respondent 138).

*"I have learned patience, drive, focus and self-motivation, all of which I believe will benefit my future career."* (Respondent 29).

*"Learned a lot about concentration, meeting deadlines, management skills."* (Respondent 67).

## **3. Communication Skills**

A high number of respondents expressed the view that their communication skills had been enhanced by their decision to return to full-time education.

*"My communication skills and interpersonal skills have definitely changed for the better."*  
(Respondent 74).

*"Communication skills, knowledge skills, management skills, advocacy skills, reporting skills, facilitating skills, time management."* (Respondent 93).

*"Public speaking, critical thinking, writing, decision-making, negotiation."* (Respondent 99).

*"I feel my communication skills have improved greatly. I do not take things personally."*  
(Respondent 126).

### ***Phase 8: Provisionally Trying New Roles***

Respondents were asked to discuss what new professional roles, if any, they were considering taking on that they would not have considered prior to making the decision to go to college as a full-time mature student. Responses here are categorised as: Not Yet Considered, Same Role and Different Role. There was no further sub-categorisation applied here.

#### **1. Not Yet Considered**

While many mature students return to college on a full-time basis as a result of a change in their employment, many are focused initially on successfully completing their course.

*"I just want to have a qualification in a certain discipline so that if a position arises I will be able to apply."* (Respondent 23).

*"The course opened my eyes to various roles."* (Respondent 67).

*"It's hard trying out new things because you are older."* (Respondent 16).

#### **2. Same Role**

While they would be happy to continue in their previous employment, having formal academic qualifications will allow them to make progress in their career.

*"The roles I am aiming for haven't changed."* (Respondent 43).

*"College did not change my idea of [whether I should be] taking or not taking on a particular role."* (Respondent 77).

*"In my case, the roles were identified. Not having a degree was a barrier to achieving them."*  
(Respondent 79).

*"I have 18 years of industry experience. I will now have the paperwork to go with my experience."* (Respondent 97).

### **3. Different Role**

In these cases, returning to full-time education offered them an opportunity to change the focus of their careers and gain the formal academic qualifications.

*"I feel I would be able to take a higher role in the workplace."* (Respondent 3).

*"I would like to move into a management role within my company."* (Respondent 9).

*"The type of professional roles I have in mind would not have been possible if I had not returned to college."* (Respondent 121).

*"I would hope to find myself in management roles in the future. Before this, I would only have been allowed to work in a supervisory position."* (Respondent 27).

*"The only potential future role is to become self-employed."* (Respondent 29).

*"The course would give me more confidence to apply for roles in other sectors."* (Respondent 130).

*"I feel I will have more qualifications and can ask for a managerial role."* (Respondent 45).

*"I'm looking at a radical change of career path."* (Respondent 46).

*"I'm considering a finance route now, whereas before, I assumed I was destined for the management route."* (Respondent 53).

*"I am willing to try any roles now."* (Respondent 56).

*"Further down the line, I could see myself in management."* (Respondent 58).

*"This course has allowed me to consider possible management positions or even setting up a consultancy business down the line."* (Respondent 63).

*"I definitely see myself now as a manager or leader in my future career, something I would never have seen myself doing."* (Respondent 66).

*"Management, professional learning, conferences, lecturing - these are all areas of interest."* (Respondent 69).

*"Facilitating a workshop of some sort."* (Respondent 74).

*"I would now consider becoming a consultant or continuing my education."* (Respondent 83).

### ***Phase 9: Building Self-Confidence and Competence***

Experiencing new situations increases an individual's ability to deal with new and relatively unfamiliar experiences. Respondents were asked to explain how they feel that their competence and self-confidence have increased in a variety of situations as a result of deciding to go to college as a full-time mature student. These are sub-categorised as Self-Confidence and Competence.

#### **1. Self-Confidence**

An examination of these and other similar comments identifies an increase in confidence as the single greatest benefit mature students said they gained from their decision to return to full-time higher education.

*"The learning I have completed has definitely improved my confidence in dealing with people and areas where I would not have been comfortable with previously."* (Respondent 1).

*"Increased confidence in my own ability, in dealing with other professionals, clients and the whole work scenario in general."* (Respondent 2).

*"I am more outgoing."* (Respondent 10).

*"Confidence builds all the way through the course as you realise that you can do it."* (Respondent 16).

*"Self-confidence has improved as I know I can get the qualification."* (Respondent 32).

*"I might be more confident in an interview situation because I've learned more skills during the year."* (Respondent 51).

*"Speaking in a room in front of people."* (Respondent 81).

*"Being able to give a presentation to a group of people with confidence."* (Respondent 92).

*"Confidence in public speaking."* (Respondent 94).

## 2. Competence

As mature students increase in their levels of competence in considering particular subject areas and develop practical skills, their confidence in expressing views and opinions, not only on this material, but also on more general topics increases.

*"I am much more capable of doing presentations or speaking in front of a group."* (Respondent 19).

*"My competence levels have increased in conjunction with my practical knowledge."* (Respondent 24).

*"I am technically more competent in this area."* (Respondent 39).

*"I believe that my competence to deal with certain situations has been enhanced."* (Respondent 56).

### ***Phase 10: Re-integration***

The final stage involves a reintegration of a person's newly acquired skills and knowledge into that person's life on the basis of his or her newly acquired perspective. Respondents were asked to explore in what ways their life has changed for the better as a result of their decision to go to college as a full-time mature student. The responses provided are sub-categorised as: confidence, happiness, work-life balance and opportunities.

## 1. Confidence

The largest number of research participants' recognised confidence as the single greatest benefit they had derived from their decision to return to full-time education.

*"Confidence and career improvement."* (Respondent 142).

*"I am more confident, I have grown up a bit and I manage my time better than I did before."* (Respondent 3).

*"I am more confident and I have the skills and knowledge to provide me with excellent opportunities."* (Respondent 7).

*"More confidence, increased knowledge."* (Respondent 8).

*"My confidence has increased and also feel like I'm a better role model to my children."* (Respondent 14).

*"Giving me a better outlook on what I can achieve."* (Respondent 155).

*"I'm definitely feeling more confident about my decision to move into a different industry as I feel I now have more relevant skills at my disposal."* (Respondent 67).

*"Each time I complete new modules in college and do well in the exams it is a great feeling and gives me the confidence to keep at it."* (Respondent 95).

## **2. Happiness**

Due to their achievements in their academic field of choice, many mature students stated that they felt happier and more content within themselves.

*"I feel happier."* (Respondent 10).

*"I'm just a happier person because I know that nothing is impossible if you are willing to put in the work."* (Respondent 16).

*"I'm challenging myself professionally and intellectually, resulting in happiness, a sense of achievement and purpose."* (Respondent 43).

## **3. Work-life Balance**

Achieving a better work-life balance as a result of their decision to return to full-time education was identified as a major gain for many research participants.

*"I work less hours, so I am home with my family more."* (Respondent 28).

*"I am better organised both with my family and personal life and now looking forward to a career in a chosen field of study."* (Respondent 32).

## **4. Opportunities**

Many full-time mature students recognised that they had been given a second chance to improve their lives and they are very grateful for and appreciative of that opportunity.

*"I have more opportunities available to me."* (Respondent 22).

*"I know I have the potential to provide myself with a better future."* (Respondent 24).

*"The doors of employment are open to me now."* (Respondent 33).

*"My life has changed for the better by returning to college as a mature student because I value the opportunity to learn."* (Respondent 88).

### ***4.2.2 Photo Elicitation Interview Findings***

In addition to using a reflective account in this research, I also used photo elicitation with personal interviews to further explore the views of 30 randomly selected respondents in one of the target colleges.

In presenting the information gleaned from the photo elicitation interviews, I wanted to ensure that their anonymity was protected and so I chose to identify them only as 'Respondent X out of a total of 30 respondents'. In each case, participants were asked to comment on images that I provided.

A key function of the photo elicitation interviews was to confirm the views expressed by mature student respondents in their reflective accounts. However, in addition, discussion of the images provided the opportunity for the mature students to expand on their views and discuss issues that were central to their experience as full-time mature students. While the mature students interviewed were very forthcoming with their views on a wide array of issues, the fact that they deviated from focusing on the specific images provided resulted in richer insights being gleaned from their descriptions of their transformative learning experiences. Therefore, the images acted as a trigger for broader discussions on a wide range of topics of interest and concern to full-time mature students.

From these discussions, it emerged that were barriers to these mature students' higher education experiences. These were then sub-categorised as internal and external factors that were perceived by many of the respondents as significant barriers to their full participation in higher education that, in turn, influenced the respondents' decisions to attend a higher education institution of the CUA as full-time mature students.

The following section identifies and discusses a number of key external barriers as described by respondents in this research.

#### ***External barriers to higher education***

In discussing the mature students' first stage in the transformative learning process, 'a disorienting dilemma', a number of common barriers emerged. These issues were also evident from the students' critical assessment of their own assumptions, in Phase 3 and in how they planned a course of action to counteract these in Phase 6. Equally, these issues were influential in how the respondents approached dealing with these issues in Phases 7 to 10 inclusive.

External barriers to higher education represent factors that are beyond the full-time mature students' control and influence. Key among these are financial issues, time pressures and travel or commuting time required to attend college on a full-time basis. Each of these is now explored along with specific examples in the form of statements from full-time mature students.

### **Finances**

By far the greatest concern for full-time mature students identified from this research was financial pressures resulting from their choice to attend college. Many of the students questioned may have given up full-time employment or may have been unemployed prior to their return. They were also often likely to have greater financial commitments than their school-leaver classmates. Statements from full-time mature students regarding their financial strains included:

*"It's very difficult to manage on a daily basis when I've still got bills to pay, but I have to focus on passing my exams."* (Respondent 23/30).

*"I'm not sure how far I'll be able to get through my college course when I am constantly strapped for cash."* (Respondent 6/30).

*"It's putting me to the pin of my collar to try to make ends meet. But I know that I can't lose focus on the end goal or I'll just end up back where I started and going nowhere."* (Respondent 11/30).

*"Because I'm under financial pressure being in college full-time, I feel I have to take on more work just to pay the bills. That just makes things worse, but I don't see that I have much choice."* (Respondent 8/30).

It would appear that it is largely expected and accepted by full-time mature students that in order for them to achieve better qualifications and thereby gain a higher paying job in the longer-term, they must manage on more limited financial resources in the shorter-term.

### **Time Pressure**

In this research, a number of full-time mature student respondents commented that they felt under increasing time pressure.

*"It can be very difficult to balance home life with getting my college work done. I don't want either one to suffer, but it can often be hard to find time to get everything done." (Respondent 7/30).*

*"I find it really difficult to find the time to get my assignments done on time at home, because I have two small children to look after." (Respondent 2/30).*

*"I'm learning to get things done quicker, because I just don't have the time to give my full attention to everything all at once. But it's hard to not always give my best to my college work because I have family commitments that have to be seen to." (Respondent 9/30).*

From these comments it is clear that achieving a work-life balance is a major challenge for many full-time mature students and the feeling that its non-achievement can add to the pressures felt on a regular basis by some full-time mature students.

### **Travel Time**

A number of comments were made by full-time mature students relating to the amount of time they spend travelling to and from college and the pressures that commuting brings to bear on them in their college experience.

*"I commute every day. Having to be in for 9 o'clock I'm always stuck in work traffic, so I end up leaving home earlier in the morning and staying later in college in the evening, just to avoid it." (Respondent 16/30).*

*"It usually takes me around 90 minutes each way every day. That's a lot of time wasted that I could be using for study or family commitments, but at the moment I have no choice." (Respondent 7/30).*

*"I'm stuck in a lease at the moment and I can't afford to move. That means I spend ages every day just getting to college and then I find that I have a big gap in my timetable and nothing to do for hours, particularly at the start of the year when we have no assignments to do." (Respondent 30/30).*

In addition to external barriers, my research also uncovered a number of internal barriers or concerns as expressed by full-time mature student respondents some of which are described in the next section.

### ***Internal barriers to higher education***

A range of barriers to higher education also emanated from how the mature students perceived themselves, as well as how they conceptualised their own challenges and limitations. These internal issues were most in evidence from the self-examination undertaken by students in Phase 2 of the transformative learning process. The degree to which the mature student research participants were willing to share their experiences with others to establish commonalities and mutual support is a reflection of Phase 4 of transformative learning, which involves relating discontent to others.

The most common internal barrier to higher education identified among full-time mature student respondents was the individual's own fear of failure. Additionally, some respondents expressed concerns that their I.T. skills were below par, primarily because they had been out of the full-time education system for some time. However, there was also the expression of a desire to achieve top grades from a number of full-time mature students.

#### **Fear of Failure**

It is clear that many full-time mature students are concerned about whether or not they will be academically capable of completing their chosen higher education course (Philips, 1986). This is especially true among those who have not participated in full-time education for a long period of time. In contrast, there is also evidence in the literature that mature students can often exceed their own expectations (Shanahan, 2000). Responses relating to this issue included:

*"I really didn't know what to expect when I came back to college. But I think the trick is to give yourself plenty of time to do assignments and to go back over material covered in class regularly until you get familiar with it."* (Respondent 9/30).

*"When I first started back in college, I really didn't know what to expect. I left school years ago, so it had all changed since then and it took me a while to get into the swing of things. After a while though, once I got used to the workload I got more comfortable and was able to focus better on my studying and getting projects done."* (Respondent 10/30).

*"I found it hard at the start when I was in a class with all of these younger students who I thought were much smarter than me. But I soon learned to speak my mind in project groups and now I work well with everyone."* (Respondent 2/30).

### **Inferior I.T. Skills**

A second internal barrier identified from responses relates to full-time mature students' perceptions that their school-leaver classmates are at an advantage due to their superior I.T. skills.

*"It's a long time ago since I last went to college and technology was very different then. I thought I'd be left behind others in the class. But you get used to it and a lot of it is down to practice." (Respondent 12/30).*

*"They have all these new systems in college now that weren't there in my day. That's a bit scary to have to deal with at the start." (Respondent 13/30).*

*"I thought the other students would be all techie wizards. But it turns out, if you turn up to classes, ask questions and then practice what you learn, there's no reason why you can't be as good, if not better, at using technology than anyone else in the class." (Respondent 15/30).*

### **Desire to Achieve**

Undoubtedly, there are full-time mature students who are not satisfied with merely achieving the minimum standard necessary to pass their exams. For these students, their college experience requires of them to do the best that they can.

*"It's not good enough for me to just pass my exams. I want to get first class honours." (Respondent 11/30).*

*"I felt when I was in college before I didn't give it my best shot. So this time around I want to make sure that I give it my all." (Respondent 12/30).*

*"Now that I've settled into a routine in college, I'm organised and focused, so I think I'm in a good position to do really well in my assignments and exams." (Respondent 3/30).*

From this examination of key internal and external barriers to higher education, as described by full-time mature students, it is clear that through reflection on their situation and how they can change it, full-time mature students have the potential to achieve transformative learning.

### **4.3 Reflections on Findings**

This section reflects on the findings from this research, as they relate to the literature review undertaken in Chapter 2. The literature review identified a number of key factors relating to

mature student participation in full-time higher education. The structure of this section is based on the same issues identified in the literature review. This was done to allow for a more structured and analytical approach to be taken in discussing how well the findings from this research reflect the key issues identified from the broad literature on mature student learning.

### ***Rationale for Returning to Full-time Higher Education***

In the literature Osborne et al.'s (2004) classification of mature students based on their primary reasons for returning to full-time higher education, provided an interesting insight. Within the Institute of Technology sector, there is evidence of *delayed traditional* students. These tend to be 23 years old, or slightly older. As a result of their closeness in age with traditional students, they generally relate well with one another. However, due to the fact that the delayed traditional students may feel that they did not make the most of their initial opportunity to go to college, they are often more focused on achieving their potential than many of the traditional school-leaver students. Currently in Ireland, there are numerous opportunities for those leaving school to pursue some form of higher or further education. There is evidence from my perspective as a lecturer that in some cases, students who make inappropriate course choices will ultimately drop out of college. However, in the case of mature students, due to the fact that they have had to make very significant sacrifices both personally and financially, there may be a higher level of appreciation of the second chance at education that they have been given.

The second category of mature students identified in the literature is that of *single parent*. The motives driving this category may be very different from those of the delayed traditional students, in that single parents may have financially dependent children. Therefore, they are under increased levels of pressure to succeed in their chosen area of study in order to be able to gain employment to support their children financially. This group may also be more likely to miss classes due to child-care issues and this can negatively impact their achievements. However, the fact that others are depending on them for their well-being also provides them with an extra incentive to be successful academically.

The third category from the literature is described as the *careerist*. The main focus for these individuals is career progression. In times of economic prosperity, these are the individuals who are targeted by Institutes of Technology to participate in on-line and short-term courses. Often these courses are tailored to the specific needs of employees in a particular sector and they have the advantage of allowing the individual to work and up-skill at the same time. This

group, though they are mature students, is not the focus of this research due to the predominantly part-time nature of their engagement with higher education.

*Escapees*, represent the fourth category of mature students are of direct relevance to this research as they represent individuals who are dissatisfied with their current employment and make the decision to pursue full-time higher education with the aim of enhancing their employment opportunities. This group is very prevalent in the CUA colleges, as well as the broader Institute of Technology sector. The challenge with these students is to recognise that their needs may differ significantly from other student groups and to ensure that these requirements are met as much as possible in order to enhance their overall college experience.

The final group is *personal growers*, which again, represent a significant proportion of the mature student population in Institutes of Technology. These are individuals who are pursuing higher education out of personal interest, rather than necessity. Many of these may be less motivated by the academic achievement element of their college experience and more focused on the self-fulfilment they achieve from pursuing an area of study that is of interest to them. They are not under the same pressure to achieve as the other mature student groups, but their enthusiasm for the subject matter gives them a strong motivation to achieve. In addition, they have given more consideration to their choice of course than school-leavers who selected courses without researching them but discovered the course was not what they expected and so they dropped out.

The other significant element of this section focuses on mature students' primary reason for returning to full-time higher education in the form of a disorienting dilemma, as described in transformative learning theory. From this research, the key motives identified by mature student respondents for their return to full-time higher education include lack of promotional opportunities in their current or previous employment, redundancy and a desire for financial stability. This correlates with findings from a variety of research study reports generated by the Irish Department of Education and Skills on the Irish higher and further education sectors (Moran, 2015).

### ***Learning Theories***

In undertaking a review of the literature, a significant range of learning theories was identified. Of these, one of those most pertinent to this research is Andragogy, which Henschke (2011), defined as "the art and science of helping adults to learn" (p.34). This theory provides a focus

on the broader issues relating to adult education which are important to understand in exploring full-time mature students' learning experiences. Issues identified in the theory of Andragogy such as mature students' interest in learning and their self-directed motivation to learn are very evident in the responses provided by the mature students in this research.

The main focus of this research is on the transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students, and so this provides a fundamental learning theory for this research. The challenge in applying transformative learning theory to this research is that most of the investigations were undertaken in the U.S. Even in a European context, the focus has been on the University sector, rather than on Institutes of Technology and this presented difficulties in applying transformative learning theory in a novel setting, while also providing an original contribution of this research. The stages of transformative learning, as described by Mezirow provided the structural basis for the empirical element of this research and while there were varying levels of detail provided by respondents on the mature student experiences, it was clear that transformative learning, to a greater or lesser extent, was taking place.

### ***Activities Promoting Transformative Learning***

Pohland and Bova (2000), Macleod et al. (2003), Mallory (2003), Feinstein (2004), and King (1997; 2004), describe one of the best ways to promote transformative learning for mature students as being the provision of learning experiences such as direct, personally engaging and stimulating reflections on their own personal experiences. Taylor (2000) also specifies activities that are known to promote transformative learning experiences of mature students particularly in higher education. These include critical thinking skills, personal self-reflection, classroom discussions and dialogues, and mentoring.

The challenge with engaging mature students in activities that promote transformative learning is that these students comprise the minority of a diverse class group. A difficulty can arise where the over-arching focus, is, of necessity on the achievement of learning outcomes and covering course material. While such tasks may be beneficial to mature students in achieving their aim of securing employment, they may not be central to their motivation in returning to college. Therefore, for educators, the challenge is to strike a balance between covering necessary course material and doing so in a way that all student groups find engaging and in reality, this may not always be feasible.

### ***Challenges Facing Full-time Mature Students***

The literature review identifies the necessity to meet the specific needs of mature students, which are recognised to be very different from those of school-leavers. According to Dawson (2003), among the biggest obstacles are lack of time, finances, confidence issues, lack of support systems, accessibility to college campus and classes, feelings of being too old to learn and social anxieties. Murphy and Fleming (2003) also found that aside from financial issues, the most significant challenges for mature students were relationships with partners, other external commitments, the academic components of essay writing and examinations. In this research, the mature students identified time constraints and financial limitations along with feeling of inadequacy as the greatest challenges they faced as full-time students.

Another key issue identified in the literature on mature student inclusion is the necessity to meet the specific needs of mature students. The fact that many mature students may have spent many years in employment, or as previously highlighted undertaking part-time or online courses, rather than pursuing full-time higher education, they may perceive that full-time higher education is designed to cater to the needs of traditional school-leaver students. The literature has identified a number of challenges that are faced predominantly by mature students including achieving a work-life balance and achieving financial stability while meeting their financial obligations, which may include childcare and other costs as well as mortgage repayments. This research has shown that these issues remain as the most significant challenges facing full-time mature students. Therefore, while these issues have been continuously highlighted in the literature, few sustainable solutions have been identified. Certainly, government funding for mature students is of great benefit in reducing financial burdens, however, it is clear that more needs to be done, given the government's stated focus on encouraging lifelong learning.

### ***Learning Styles***

The literature review undertaken in this research identified a number of learning styles and theories which have been developed over the years, such as those presented by Newble, Entwistle and their research associates which categorise students as either surface or deep learners. However, this is viewed by other researchers, including Ferrel (1983) as an over-simplification of the learning process. One theory, which has received general recognition and acceptance, is Kolb's Learning Styles Theory. This theory stipulates that learning in its truest sense must involve the integration of thinking, feeling and doing. From experience, I have noted

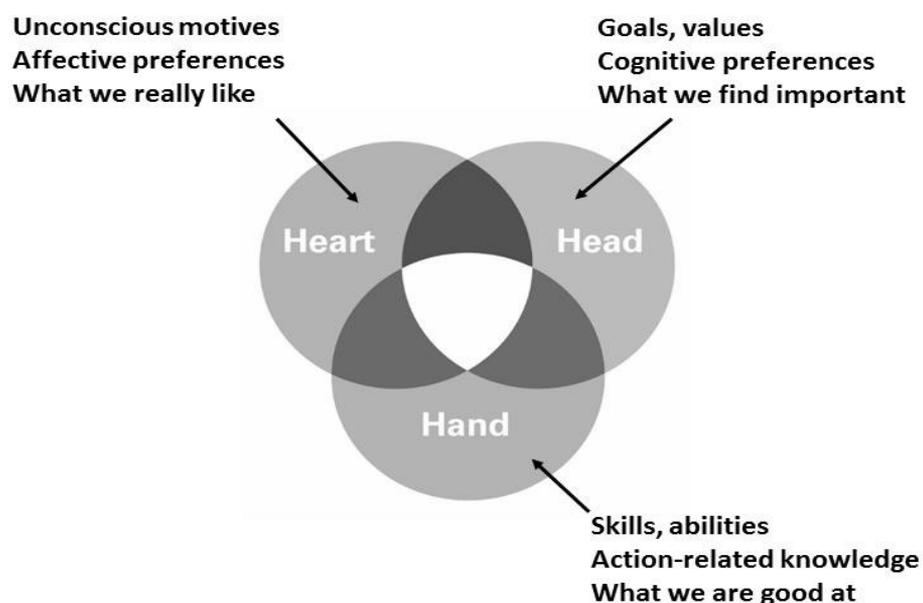
that mature students are interested in a deeper level of learning and are interested to know how gaining specific knowledge will enhance their lives beyond college. In the context of this research, such a comprehensive model, which Singleton (2015) has referred to as the Head, Heart and Hands Model for Transformative Learning, provides the ideal visual description of the learning favoured by mature students. Therefore, it is worthy of further investigation and its application to the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland provides an additional original contribution of this research.

#### 4.4 Situating Findings in the Head, Heart & Hands Model of Transformative Learning

In order to reasonably aspire to the achievement of transformative learning, the college experience of mature students must involve deep engagement, reflection and relational understanding.

In the following sections, each of the three elements of the model is explored in the context of its application to transformative learning. This is done using direct quotes from a random sample of 6 of the full-time mature student participants in this research, with their response recorded using the alphabetic aliases Alison, Barry, Caroline, Damien, Evelyn and Francis.

*Figure 4.2 The Head, Heart and Hands Model for Transformative Learning*



*Source: Singleton, 2015.*

### ***Head (cognitive domain of learning)***

The head stores all psychological and intellectual functions that allow individuals to understand the world and form rational judgements about certain things including perception, memory, imagination, thought and language (Brühlmeier, 2010).

To illustrate this, these are respondents' comments:

*"I had a lot of life experiences, but I didn't have the academic qualifications to back them up."* (Barry).

*"I thought that other students in the class would think I was strange for coming back into full-time education at my age."* (Alison).

This domain is most frequently represented as predominant in academic institutions. In other words, at an undergraduate level, particularly in the earlier years of study, much of the focus in an education context is on memorising facts rather than being able to express one's independent thoughts.

*"I was worried, when I decided to come back to college as a mature student, that there would be a lot of new information that I would have to remember, but I try as much as possible to understand what I'm learning about and I find that makes remembering easier."* (Francis).

*"A lot of the younger students seem to think that their only purpose in college is to learn off a set of random facts, so that they can produce them in an exam. I like to think there's more to college life than that."* (Damien).

However, it is important not to ignore the other two elements, heart and hands, which are necessary in order to enhance the comprehensive development of a full-time mature student.

### ***Heart (affective domain of learning)***

Emotions stimulate learning and determine whether an individual is confident in this learning.

*"Coming back into full-time education, for me, meant a real change in how I felt about higher education. I was there because I couldn't get the type of job I wanted without the academic qualifications. So, I'm looking at my time in college as a stepping stone to achieving my professional ambitions"* (Barry).

Jensen (2006), states that the affective side of learning is the interplay of students' feelings, actions and thoughts.

*"When I first started thinking about coming back to education as a mature student, I felt nervous and very unsure of myself. But as I've been able to do well, I'm feeling more confident that I made the right decision."* (Caroline).

*"Some of the material is really interesting and I can see how it might be used in a real-world setting, especially through my project work"* (Evelyn).

*"I like it when our lecturer gives practical examples of some concept, because then I find I can remember what was said in class."* (Alison).

From my own experience as a lecturer, I have observed that full-time mature students enjoy active learning, that is, learning by doing. The third key element in the head, heart and hands model of transformative learning examines the importance of hands-on experience.

#### ***Hands (psychomotor domain of learning)***

Research done by neuroscientists found that the part of the brain that processes movements is the very same part that processes learning. Movements and learning are therefore in continuous interplay (Jensen, 2006).

*"I try to make sure that I take regular break, stay well hydrated and do regular exercise when I'm studying."* (Barry).

To neglect the body in learning is to neglect the fact that the human body possesses an integrated system of cells, molecules, muscles and organs which are completely interdependent (Jensen, 2006).

*"I have a young family, so I'm kept very busy and active outside of my college life."* (Evelyn).

The contemporary brain, mind and body research established significant connections between movement and learning. This presents a significant challenge for educators, who are not expected to be equally competent in the instruction of students in these areas.

*"I find walking around while I'm trying to understand a new topic helps to keep my head clear and my mind focused."* (Caroline).

*"I couldn't just learn off facts and figures without understanding what I'm learning about."*  
(Damien).

Transformative learning tends to require independent, active learners. Unfortunately, passive learning is fostered by the current educational system.

The Head, Heart and Hands model of transformative learning could well provide an organising principle to integrate and transform pedagogical perspectives for education (Sipos et al., 2008).

***Mezirow's Theory, Head, Heart and Hands Model and Mature Students' Narratives***

Table 4.2 below, first introduced in Chapter Two, is now revised and identifies each of the stages in Mezirow's transformative learning process as they apply to the sample of six students using supporting quotations to provide evidence of their transformative experiences and its links to the concepts of thinking, feeling and doing represented by the Head, Heart and Hands Model.

**Table 4.2 Mezirow's Phases of Transformative Learning (TL) Applied to Mature Students with the 3H Model**

Phase	Mezirow's TL Phase	Application to Mature Students	Evidence from Mature Student Interviews	3H Model Application
1	A disorienting dilemma.	Change in personal circumstances e.g. redundancy, significant birthday, government funding available.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "As a single parent, I had to support my child, but I had no real skills." (Caroline)</li> <li>• "I knew I was better than the job I was stuck in." (Barry)</li> <li>• "The only way I could improve my situation was to get a marketable qualification." (Evelyn)</li> <li>• "I had no interest in going to college when I was young, but now I had no choice if I didn't want to be left behind." (Alison)</li> <li>• "I needed to retrain for a job that was more likely to be around in the longer term." (Damien).</li> <li>• "The company I worked for was moving in another direction and I had no skills in that new area, so I had to retrain." (Francis).</li> </ul>	Head
2	Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame.	Regret at not having pursued education sooner, feel potential has not been fulfilled, fear of being inadequate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I was very immature when I left school and I ended up going from one dead-end job to another." (Caroline).</li> <li>• "I always want to learn new things and the chance to go back to college turned up just as I was getting bored again." (Barry).</li> <li>• "I wasted opportunities to have a better life when I was younger and I wasn't about to make that mistake twice." (Evelyn).</li> <li>• "I always had the attitude of 'I'll do it some other time', but that time never came...until now." (Alison)</li> <li>• "I feel that if I had put in more effort to be better qualified when I was younger, I wouldn't be in the position I'm in now." (Damien).</li> </ul>	Heart

3	<p><b>A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions.</b></p>	<p>Examination of their place in society on a personal, economic and social level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I should have done more in-house training. I suppose I got comfortable in my job and didn't even consider that it might not last." (Francis).</li> <li>• "I always had the attitude that I was too busy looking after my child to do anything else. Anyway, why should I when I was getting paid to stay at home?" (Caroline).</li> <li>• "I always wanted to learn new things and I had and still have a natural curiosity." (Barry).</li> <li>• "I could never buy anything I really wanted because I just didn't have the spare cash." (Evelyn).</li> <li>• "I was always fairly content with my lot when I was younger, but as I got older, I realised there was more out there for me." (Alison).</li> <li>• "I assumed I would always have the same job." (Damien).</li> <li>• "I thought the job I had was the best I could get." (Francis).</li> </ul>	<p>Head</p>
4	<p><b>Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change.</b></p>	<p>Relate to experience of other mature learners they may know or have observed returning to education.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Through my child's school friends' parents, I knew a few other mothers in a similar situation to myself." (Caroline).</li> <li>• "I have a wide range of interests, so I've met lots of people over the years through those." (Barry).</li> <li>• "I'm still friends with a few of my former school mates and some of them are in the same situation as me." (Evelyn).</li> <li>• "Where I live there is an active retirement group and I've met a lot of people through that." (Alison).</li> <li>• "With the economy only just coming back now after the recession, I know a lot of people who lost their jobs." (Damien).</li> </ul>	<p>Heart</p>

5	<p><b>Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions.</b></p>	<p>Explore the concept of being a student again, how will personal relationships be affected, how will they integrate with other students/lecturers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I had always heard from other people that there were new technologies being used but I didn't do anything about it until it was nearly too late." (Francis).</li> <li>• "For me in considering going back to college, my priority was childcare." (Caroline).</li> <li>• "My main motivation in going back to college was to learn something new. Because I am constantly learning, I am well used to meeting new people." (Barry).</li> <li>• "I did wonder if I was taking on too much by going back to college and whether I would fit in with my new classmates." (Evelyn).</li> <li>• "For me the biggest issue was whether I was too old to start learning something new." (Alison).</li> <li>• "I had no choice but to gain new skills. All other issues were out of my control, so they didn't bother me too much." (Damien).</li> <li>• "I was totally focused on making sure that I did my best. Because of that I asked a lot of questions in class and I also learned to be an effective team player." (Francis).</li> </ul>	<p>Head &amp; Hands</p>
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<p>6</p>	<p><b>Planning a course of action.</b></p>	<p>Considering finance, time management, childcare, personal relationships, travel, application process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Because I had responsibilities at home, I had to learn to be very organised and efficient with my college time." (Caroline).</li> <li>• "Finance wasn't really an issue for me. I did courses because they interested me. But I certainly have to stay focused on my college work and sometimes that can put a strain on my life outside of college." (Barry).</li> <li>• "I knew I had been given a great opportunity to improve my situation and it was up to me to make it work." (Evelyn).</li> <li>• "Considering going back to college was going to be a very different life for me, I had to give a lot of thought to how I was going to manage, both logistically and personally." (Alison).</li> <li>• "The threat of losing my job made me very focused on what I could do to improve my own situation, but it was definitely a challenge to get all my college work done while working part-time." (Damien).</li> <li>• "I knew that there would be plenty of other people looking for my job if I didn't focus on up-skilling. The impact of the time I have to spend going over and back to college is something I need to plan for better in future." (Francis).</li> </ul>	<p>Head &amp; Hands</p>
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7	<p><b>Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.</b></p>	<p>Attending lectures, tutorials, self-directed learning, integrating with other students.</p>	<p><b>Head &amp; Hands</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Because I have to be so organised, I'm pretty good at going to class and getting work done on time." (Caroline).</li> <li>• "I think it's much easier to maintain an interest in something when there's no one forcing you to do it." (Barry).</li> <li>• "I've seen how hard my life can be if I don't give college my best shot and I don't want to go back there." (Evelyn).</li> <li>• "I found it very challenging at the start but I soon got used to where I had to be and what I had to do. Now I find some of the younger students coming to me for help." (Alison).</li> <li>• "I suppose because I was coming from a challenging work environment, I was used to self-discipline." (Damien).</li> <li>• "One of the hardest things for me was to find common ground with some of the younger students. But it's something I had to get used to." (Francis).</li> </ul>
8	<p><b>Provisional trying of new roles.</b></p>	<p>Applying theory in laboratory settings, computer tutorials, work experience, research, undertaking assessments and examinations.</p>	<p><b>Head &amp; Hands</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Being older than a lot of others in the class gave me an advantage in terms of my willingness to try new things, but at the start, I had no idea what I was doing for example in figuring out how to carry out research." (Caroline).</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I always want to learn new skills, so I don't really fear new experiences. I find them exciting for the most part." (Barry).</li> <li>• "At the start I had no confidence in how to do a lot of things, but I soon figured out that a lot of confidence comes from repetition and being familiar with things and that's up to me." (Evelyn).</li> <li>• "One of my biggest fears was all the new technology I'd have to deal with in college. But, to be fair, the lecturers and I.T. staff are very understanding and helpful." (Alison).</li> <li>• "I knew going into college that I'd have to develop a new skill set fast. So I was determined to get to grips with anything new I had to deal with." (Damien).</li> <li>• "My work background meant that I was fairly comfortable with new technology, but assessments were alien to me at the start. But I had to just figure it out" (Francis).</li> </ul>
<p><b>9</b></p>	<p><b>Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.</b></p>	<p>Achieving learning outcomes, passing exams, gaining qualification, using skills in new setting e.g. workplace</p>	<p>Head &amp; Hands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Because I'm still in college full time, I haven't really had the chance to use my new skills, but I'm really happy with my progress so far." (Caroline).</li> <li>• "I'm very focused on getting the most out of my college experience and for me that means giving my best in the exams. It would be interesting to be able to use my new skills in the workplace, but that isn't really a priority for me." (Barry).</li> <li>• "I definitely feel more confident that I can use my new skills in a good job once I finish college." (Evelyn).</li> </ul> <p>"I feel like at the start of my course I was playing catch-up with others, but I have gained a lot of confidence and I think I could hold my own in a job interview." (Alison).</p>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "For me, not only passing, but doing very well in my exams is proof that I have what it takes to apply my new skills successfully in the workplace." (Damien).</li> <li>• "Getting this qualification, after all my hard work will give me great confidence and I will know that I deserve a promotion." (Francis).</li> </ul>	
<p><b>10</b></p>	<p><b>A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective.</b></p>	<p>Reassessment of oneself, reflecting back to phase one to review progress, determination as to how they and/or their circumstances have changed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "My life has changed in ways that I could not have imagined before I started in college. I'm so glad I took the chance. It has changed my life for the better." (Caroline).</li> <li>• "Being able to tackle a wide variety of courses, even though I do most of it out of interest, gives me encouragement to push myself further." (Barry).</li> <li>• "The day I decided to go to college, I made the best decision ever. Now I can see how much I have benefitted from doing it." (Evelyn).</li> <li>• "I have a new found confidence in what I can achieve. The sky is now the limit." (Alison).</li> <li>• "Being forced to refocus on a new area of knowledge has given me a whole new enthusiasm for life in general." (Damien).</li> <li>• "Because I needed to up-skill, I probably had a bit of a negative attitude at the start of college. But now I can see the possibilities and I have a new perspective on all parts of my life" (Francis).</li> </ul>	<p>Head, Heart &amp; Hands</p>

(Source: Adapted from Kitchenham, 2008, p.10).

The final section below provides a summary of this chapter.

#### **4.5 Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to present the findings from the empirical element of the research undertaken. These findings illustrate the lived experiences of the full-time mature students surveyed. A number of predictable issues were identified from the reflective accounts, most particularly in terms of the financial constraints facing full-time mature students. In addition, the challenges of maintaining a work/life balance and time management issues were highlighted in the photo elicitation interviews. Since this type of study had not previously been conducted specifically in this sector, it can now be said with certainty that these factors have a significant impact on full-time mature students within the CUA. Thus, it is clear that full-time mature students are under significant pressures that traditional students are less likely to experience.

Undoubtedly, evidence of transformative learning was apparent in a number of full-time mature students and the lived experiences of full-time mature students in this research were reflective of findings from the literature on transformative learning in other sectors. In particular, the negative issues reported by full-time mature students are reported in the broader literature on transformative learning (Singleton, 2015; Hampson and Rich-Tolsma, 2015).

The openness with which respondents participated in this research is to be commended. In broad terms, the experience of returning to full-time education as a mature student is viewed as a positive experience, but as shown by the responses provided in this chapter there are also issues which can negatively impact on the learning experiences of full-time mature students.

The findings from this research are further considered in the following discussion chapter and will form the basis for many of the recommendations that are made in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Final Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter seeks to discuss the findings presented in the previous chapter, using interpretative phenomenological analysis, which is informed by both the literature and my own role as a lecturer to both mature students and traditional school-leavers. Interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to offer insights into how a given person in a specific context, makes sense of a specific phenomenon. As described in Chapter 3, the IPA method recognises the interpretative role of the researcher and thus the influence of my own personal attitudes and experiences on the interpretation of the data collected is acknowledged. However, every effort was made to ensure that a balanced and measured interpretation has been applied as described in recognised expert literature.

This section is designed to combine a discussion of the existing body of knowledge with the evidence gathered during this research to provide practical ways in which full-time mature students' overall learning experiences in Irish Institutes of Technology can be enhanced and the potential for transformative learning can be increased.

In line with the primary research question exploring the transformative learning experiences as described by full-time mature students in the current constituent institutes of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance, the key secondary research question or research sub-question to be answered in this chapter is: What discussion of the findings, final conclusions and recommendations may be derived from this research?

Answering this research question involves an in-depth discussion of the findings from this research which inform the aims of this chapter.

#### ***5.1.1 Chapter Aims***

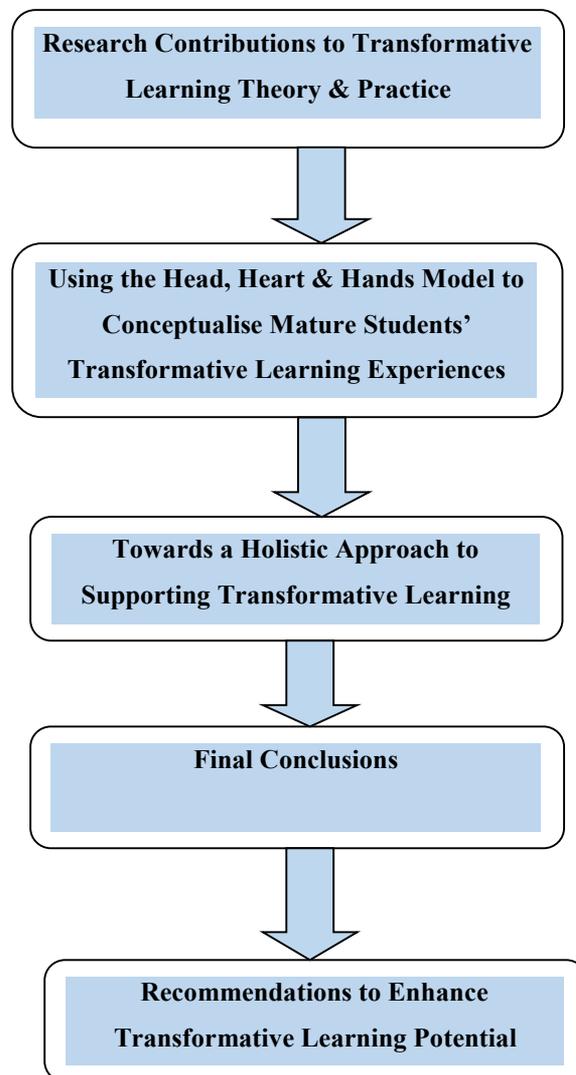
The aims of this chapter are:

1. To examine the contributions made by this research to the application of transformative learning theory.
2. To discuss the role of the Head, Heart and Hands (3H) Model of transformative learning in defining and conceptualising mature students' experiences.
3. To introduce a more holistic model to support mature student learning based on the findings from this research.

4. To make recommendations for further research on transformative learning.

A structural representation of this chapter is presented in Figure 5.1.

**Figure 5.1 Chapter Structure**



## **5.2 Research Contributions to Transformative Learning Theory and Practice**

The positioning of this research within three constituent colleges of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance of the Institute of Technology sector provided its first original contribution. Despite the fact that this sector of higher education in Ireland is expanding and accounts for a higher proportion of mature students than the university sector, it has been largely ignored in terms of research on transformative learning. In exploring the transformative learning experiences of full-time mature students within this sector, I undertook an extensive review of the literature

on adult learning theories with a particular focus on andragogy, constructivism and transformative learning. From this review, I identified a wide range of theoretical representations of adult learning. In particular, I observed overlaps between andragogy, the method and practice of teaching adult learners which was popularised by Knowles in the 1970s and constructivism, as advocated by Vygotsky, among others, which explores the theory of how people learn. The difficulty that was apparent from the reviews of relevant literature on these topics was that they typically lacked examples of how the theory would work in practice, particularly in the context of full-time mature students. This gap was filled, to some extent, by transformative learning theory.

### ***5.2.1 Evaluating the Complexities of Transformative Learning Theory***

As I explored transformative learning further, I identified a number of schools of thought. Included in these were the contentions of Mezirow, who is credited with having coined the term, that in order to have achieved transformative learning, all 10 steps of the process he developed must have been completed in a specific order, although he later revised this view. This contrasts with the perspectives of researchers such as Freire, who views mature students as being in control of their own transformative learning which need not necessarily take place in an educational setting, while Daloz favours a more structured learning environment. Researchers, such as Boyd, lack a pedagogical structure and Willis contends that mature students themselves can influence their own transformation. O'Sullivan and Taylor, uniquely focus on the social dimensions of transformative learning.

The theoretical contributions of a number of other researchers were also discussed. However, this only served to highlight the lack of availability of an alternative structured approach to transformative learning that might be useful in this research. None of the researchers specifically focused on full-time mature students and as recognised by Moran (2015), the experiences of part-time mature students can be very different. However, in order to clearly track any evidence of transformative learning from the mature student respondents in this research, it was necessary to utilise a structured description of transformative learning. In addition, the chosen explanation needed to be focused on mature students' learning, rather than on adult learning in a more general sense, and be widely accepted and respected by other researchers. For these reasons, I chose to apply Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning and in doing so I identified another original contribution of my research in terms of the application of Mezirow's theory to elements of the Irish Institute of Technology sector.

Several previous reviews of transformative learning theory (e.g. Taylor, 1997, 2000, 2007) they reveal a concept that has been constantly evolving. Reviews have found a growing recognition of: the role of context; the varied nature of the catalyst process; the importance of extra-rational ways of knowing, the significance of differences between how individuals learn the role of relationships and an increase in research on fostering transformative learning. In addition, other theoretical explorations of transformative learning beyond that of Mezirow (e.g. Boyd & Meyers, 1988; Cranton, 2006; Freire, 1984; Kegan, 2000; O'Sullivan, 1999; Tisdell, 2003) provide alternative perspectives. But despite this new level of understanding, these reviews, although helpful in accomplishing much of what is essential to synthesising current research have also resulted in some negative consequences. To an extent these reviews have been given too much influence, and the individual studies on which the reviews are based are rarely objectively critiqued and discussed by scholars when establishing a rationale for the necessity of further research. It would appear as if these reviews have provided an all-encompassing report on all the available published literature, inclusive of the findings from each study, and are therefore perceived to be the final interpretation of the current state of research about transformative learning, without acknowledging the limitations of a review in capturing what is published.

There is a growing application of other theoretical perspectives, beyond Mezirow's conception of transformative learning (e.g. Chin, 2006; Sandlin & Bey, 2006). These alternative perspectives include: a) the work of Boyd, Dirkx, Kegan, Tisdell, O'Sullivan, Freire, Dewey and Vygotsky; and b) specific theoretical perspectives such as Afrocentrism, critical, transpersonal and grief theory; and c) as well as an alternative lens (e.g. The Contextualised Model of Adult Learning, King, 2008). However, other theoretical perspectives, with seemingly varying underlying assumptions about the nature of transformative learning, often overstate the influence one theory possibly has of reducing the flaws of another, as if, together they possibly represent an all-encompassing model of transformative learning (e.g. Brown, 2006; Hanson, 2010; King, 2009; Margo & Polyzoi, 2009). Furthermore, in terms of alternative theories there is a tendency for researchers and writers to be too deterministic; where the data seems to readily apply and be unquestionably supportive of transformative learning, all the while disregarding the necessity for meaningful theoretical analysis. Despite these faults, there are a number of studies that offer some promising theoretical perspectives (e.g. Nohl, 2009).

Studies centred on fostering transformative learning continue to be the major focus of many researchers. These also provide the basis for major assumptions associated with Mezirow's

perspectives, including building on life experiences, creating a secure and welcoming learning environment, and focusing on the specific learning needs of individuals. Each of these is important in encouraging mature student to embrace their learning.

However, there remains no standard approach to fostering transformative learning, and it is critical to be cognisant of individual differences and contextual influences, particularly in situations where traditional school-leavers and mature students are placed in the same learning environment.

One area of particular interest, which has implications for this research, is the social character of transformative learning theory when explored through the lens of "social recognition" (Nohl, 2006) and "social accountability" (Chin, 2006). From this research, it would appear that social acceptance, acknowledgment, and possibly appreciation by others' peers are all important to the transformative process. This implies that transformative learning is situated between the personal and social, demonstrating a reciprocal process (Scott, 2003), both influenced by others (social recognition, relationships) and incorporating a greater sense of responsibility for others (social accountability). These insights change the focus from the individual to incorporate the social context where learning takes place, which has implications and potential opportunities for the college environment in terms of their need to recognise and embrace the more social elements of mature students' learning.

Another significant discussion point entails research about the practice of fostering transformative learning, which indicates that it is not a "one size fits all" approach, due to a wide array of contexts, in terms of both settings and disciplines and strategies described by researchers. This evolving diverse approach to transformative learning has significant inferences for the practice of fostering transformative learning. It also questions the inherent assumption of learner-centred teaching and other assumptions long associated with transformative learning (Taylor, 2009).

So what are the broad implications of these issues for transformative learning research? First, I suggest using literature reviews about transformative learning less for drawing definitive conclusions, and more as a mechanism for identifying exceptional studies in the field. These will then provide a model for more significant research. Secondly, some researchers may choose to revisit data on transformative learning and reengage in more significant theoretical evaluation of their findings. Thus, the focus shifts from exploring new questions, to carrying out a more in-depth analysis of the data that has already been gathered.

The relevance of transformative learning theory to higher education practice is related to the fact that it differentiates various types of learning based on their outcomes. Mezirow & Associates (2000) state that "it is commonly acknowledged that people learn in different ways. Yet it seems when it comes to transformative learning, we do not expect people to exhibit varied styles or preferences" (p.190). Transformative learning is seen to be a process in which we become critically reflective of our own assumptions or those of others arrive at an insight, and justify our new perspective through discourse. Cranton suggests that "not that there is anything wrong with or missing in transformative learning theory as it is currently described, but I suggest that people, due to their psychological makeup vary in how they experience the process" (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p.190).

This research has highlighted that while transformative learning is a natural occurrence for many adults in response to life events; it is rarely an explicit instructional objective of formal learning or training. One of the biggest challenges to implementing transformative learning noted in the literature is that learning on such a deep level is difficult, if not impossible, to cause to happen within the controlled conditions of a training event (Taylor & Laros, 2014). This point is borne out by the fact that higher education class groups tend to be a mixture of traditional school-leavers and mature students.

Additionally, transformative learning challenges pre-existing ideas, received notions, and cultural norms: it can be disorienting and emotionally upsetting, making the process inappropriate for typical training environments. Institutes of Technology tend to operate on the basis of standard course outlines and learning outcomes that may leave little room for innovative teaching and learning methods that might be more conducive to the achievement of transformative learning. Providing appropriate levels of challenge, on one hand, versus support, on the other, is essential. The balance between challenge and support must be orchestrated and this can be a challenge given large class sizes in Institutes of Technology. However, through the use of smaller groups and skilled facilitation, this is possible.

Successful transformative learning needs to include supports for mature students before and after they return to full-time higher education, but particularly after. This is to offset the inevitable frustration, setbacks, and other barriers, including those highlighted in this research that mature students may encounter following their decision to attend college on a full-time basis.

Transformative learning theory has been critiqued on the basis that it does not have an adequate social dimension (Collard & Law, 1989; Clarke & Wilson, 1991; Newman, 1993) prompting clarifications and further development of the theory (Mezirow, 1989). While a social dimension to their learning was highlighted as important by some mature students, others view a social dimension as a distraction where they are already under pressure due to family, financial and other commitments. Collard and Law (1989) say transformation theory is overly concerned with individual change. However, I would argue that a change in perspective by mature students can be a critical success factor. To this end, Mezirow (1991b, 1994b, 1997) highlights the importance of the connection between transformation and social action by suggesting that learners be helped to analyse their common problems through participatory research, discover options for social action, build social alliances and connections with others, and develop the ability to work with others in order to take social action. Within Institutes of Technology, there is a strong focus on group work and an increasing interest in engagement with outside entities such as companies and government organisations to provide practical experiences for students. Also, in the context of this research, this focus on alliance formation can be highlighted as a major advantage of integrating mature students with traditional school-leavers in classes where each has a very clear opportunity to learn from and be influenced by the views of the other. This, in turn, can facilitate learning by all students.

Ultimately, Mezirow (1997) places action at the centre of the transformative process but he always draws a distinction between fostering critically reflective learning and fostering social action, which refers to "an act that takes into consideration the actions and reactions of individuals" (p.60). Within an academic environment, the traditional focus has been on encouraging critical reflection, particularly among students as they progress towards the latter stages of their courses. As a lecturer, I have observed how many mature students have more advanced critical reflection skills than those of their school-leaver classmates, which frequently gives them a distinct academic advantage. However, of increasing importance is the concept of social action, which is about people coming together to improve their own lives and those of others through providing creative solutions to problems that impact their communities. Such actions can, in their own ways, be transformative both for the giver and receiver. It is in this dimension of learning that mature students can provide guidance and support to traditional school-leavers, which may ultimately result in those students' learning experiences being transformed. This dimension of transformation is currently under-researched and therefore has great potential as an area of further study.

Having undertaken an extensive review of the relevant literatures, I was able to identify Mezirow's description of transformative learning as that which best applied to this research context.

### ***5.2.2 Application of Chosen Transformative Learning Theory to Research Context***

Once I had identified Mezirow's explanation of the phases of transformative learning as the optimum theoretical foundation for my research, I had to then explore ways of gathering information from a potentially large number of geographically-dispersed full-time mature students. In identifying the most appropriate research design to apply to this study, it was clear that a predominantly qualitative, mixed methods research design would be preferable to one that was purely quantitative or qualitative. This was also done while recognising that there is an established need for more quantitative research studies to be carried out on transformative learning. Once a mixed methodology was decided upon, I then set about evaluating a wide array of data collection instruments. In exploring the potential of possible alternatives, I had to be cognisant of the necessity for respondent confidentiality while I was also interested in investigating novel data collection methods. My use in this research of reflective accounts, which were distributed through the I.T. functions in each of the participating colleges, provided a number of significant advantages. Firstly, the structured layout, based on Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning provided focus to the respondents. In addition, the anonymous nature of their participation would appear to have encouraged openness in terms of the information they divulged. As a result of these factors, there was an exceptionally high response rate of 28%. Based on my review of the literature on mature student learning, I can also surmise that this significant response rate can be attributed to the fact that all of the respondents were mature student, who are often more focused on their learning due to their awareness that they have been given a valuable opportunity to gain a useful academic qualification. The findings from the reflective accounts provided clear categories in each of the phases of transformative learning and I was able to identify unemployment and lack of opportunities as the most prevalent reasons why respondents decided to return to full-time education. A feeling of having no option, combined with recognition that their college experience represented unfinished business was identified by over 65% of the mature students questioned. The major of students, at 60%, assumed that there would be a heavy workload involved in their return to college. Listening to others and time management were identified by more than half of all respondents when asked about factors that assisted them in improving their transition to full-time third-level education, while 60% noted an increase in their self-

confidence. Time management was viewed as the most important factor in developing a plan for success in college by half of the students surveyed and it was also identified as the most important skill to be gained in order to successfully negotiate the intricacies of college life. This makes sense in the context of mature students who may have dependent children and household commitment and who are seeking the optimum work-life balance. Most of those questioned had not yet settled on a particular career. Self-confidence was identified as being of more importance than competence in a specific area, possibly on the basis that many employers require their staff to undertake on-the-job training to ensure they have the best skill-set for their particular role. By a considerable margin, the greatest gain identified by students from pursuing their college course was confidence. This, in turn, will motivate them to pursue their ideal career. An interesting element of the reflective account responses provided was that even though the same size of text box was provided for each respondent, some mature students were compelled to provide detailed and lengthy descriptions, while others identified only a small number of issues, which they discussed either very briefly or did not provide any further explanation. However, despite this, it was still possible to extract the key points from each response. A bigger issue was the time involved in documenting and categorising all of the data provided, given the high response rate. But the good quality of the responses provided and the unique perspectives these provided made this a very worthwhile process.

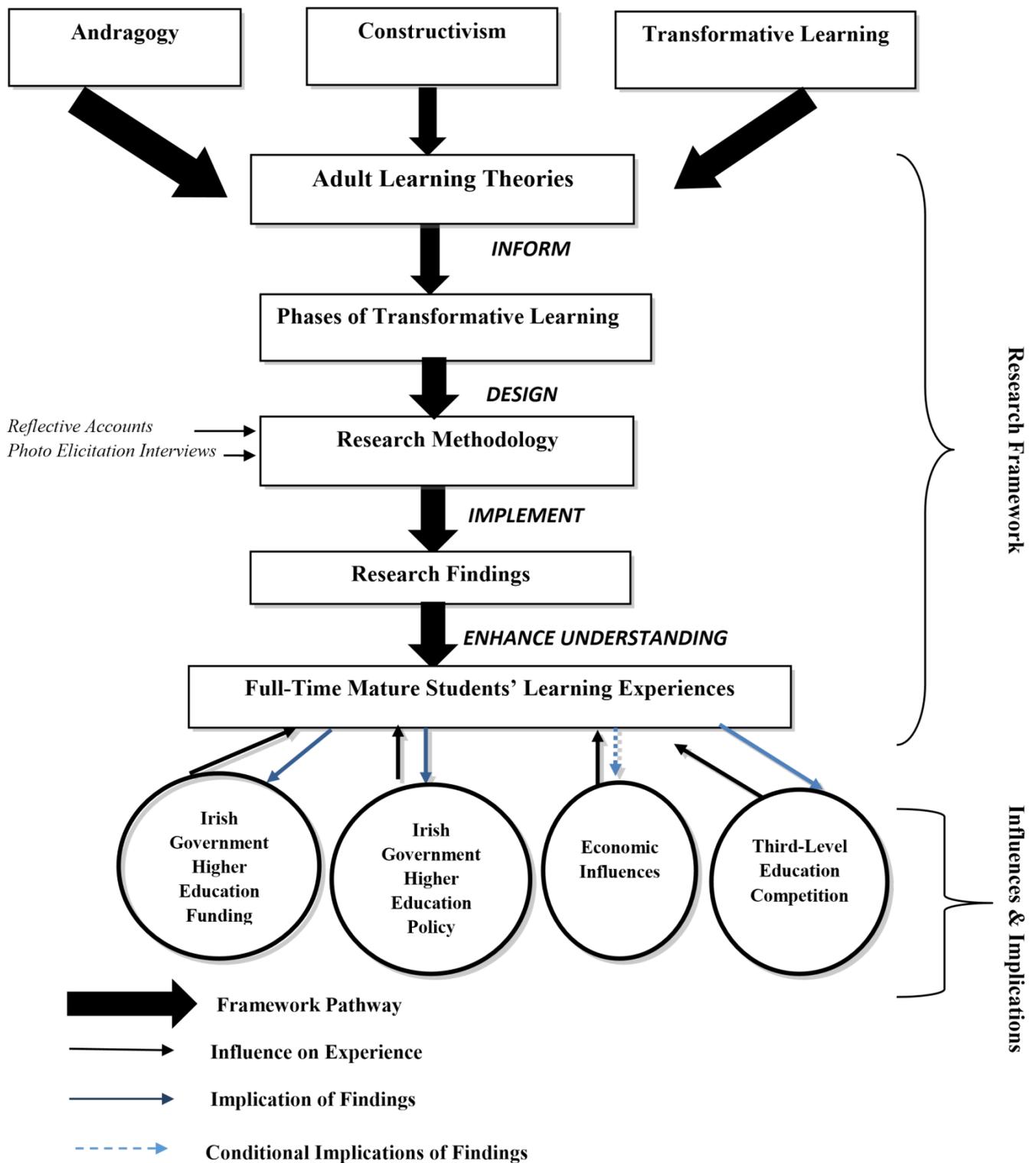
Following on from the reflective accounts, I undertook photo elicitation interviews with a smaller number of mature students from one of the participant colleges. This was done to explore whether the findings were consistent with those of the reflective accounts and to delve further into a number of issues that relate to mature student learning, in particular the internal and external barriers faced almost uniquely by mature students. The factors identified by the photo elicitation interviews which followed the phases of transformative learning largely mirrored those identified by the reflective accounts. In addition, among the most prevalent external barriers acknowledged in this element of the research were financial and time pressures. These are not surprising given that many mature students had more significant financial and other commitments than those of traditional school-leavers. The time that many mature students had to spend commuting to and from college was also identified as a contributory factor in preventing them from maximising their learning experience. In addition, a number of internal barriers were identified, which resulted from the students' perceptions of themselves. Among the most prevalent of these was a fear of failure. This reflects the fact that many mature students feel that they have been away from formal education for too long. Linked to this is their perception that they would struggle with I.T. related material and tasks. These

issues can provide mature students with an added level of anxiety, but it can also mean that they work harder than other students to ensure they are successful and possess a greater desire to achieve success in their college courses.

The primary aim of this research was to investigate the transformative learning experiences of mature full-time students within the constituent colleges of the CUA. The findings from the reflective accounts and photo elicitation interviews could then be described and evaluated in these terms and I was able to identify a number of individuals who appeared to have achieved transformative learning. However, the research findings also highlighted a factor which was identified in the literature review, namely that it is difficult to ascertain definitively when the transformative learning process has been completed. Rather, it is apparent that very many of the respondents had achieved some of Mezirow's stages. Once again with reference to the literature, there remains an unanswered question as to whether, of necessity, each and every one of the phases of transformative learning as described by Mezirow must be completed and in a particular order for transformative learning to be said to have taken place. In spite of this shortcoming in the literature, identification of the key components of an effective transformative learning experience by mature students from this research, led to my development of the framework shown in Figure 5.2 below.

This framework identifies the influential entities and factors that impact on full-time mature students' transformative learning experiences, as explored in this research. Thus, this framework represents an additional unique contribution of this research.

Figure 5.2 Full-Time Mature Students' Transformative Learning Experiences Framework



Ultimately, the findings from the empirical element of this research, in conjunction with an extensive review of the literature did lead to an enhanced understanding on my part of the broader learning experiences, challenges and advantages of mature students in the Irish Institute of Technology sector.

More broadly, in addition to the literature, research methodology and research findings, the four circles in this diagram: Irish government higher education funding, Irish government higher education policy, economic influences and third-level education competition are also key factors in this evaluation of mature students transformative learning framework. These, while not directly influential in the daily experiences of mature students in the context of their transformative learning experiences, must function effectively in order to minimise disruption to full-time mature students' learning experiences. For example, a significant issue that was mentioned in the reflective accounts was the lack of funding available to some mature students and the resulting challenges they faced.

It has been the policy of the Irish government for many years to provide limited funding to the Institutes of Technology, while at the same time restricting their capacity to seek funding from external entities. All the while, there are ever-increasing numbers of students, including mature students, who are being expected to silently accept resource limitation issues. As a result, lecturers and academic managers have been able, of necessity, to develop very innovative teaching methodologies, which involve increased levels of student engagement with industry and which, therefore, are more appealing to mature students. Another challenge relating to funding is that when the Irish economy is doing well, there are fewer applications from mature students, which in turn results in reduced government funding. However, when there is an economic downturn, the number of such applications increases due to individuals losing their jobs. This results in increased pressure on already stretched resources.

The Irish government, in line with the Bologna Declaration, has a stated aim of having a approximately 20% of their full-time student population in Institutes of Technology who are mature students, with fewer allocated places required to be made available by the Irish university sector. However, few colleges meet this quota. This, in turn, has implications for potential sources of funding as well as the dynamics of the class groups. As the majority of learner cohorts in Irish Institutes of Technology have at least a small number of mature students this provides an added dimension for all of the students as well as for the lecturers involved. While I, in my capacity as a lecturer, am in favour of including mature students in classes, the concept of a quota system may be problematic as student numbers increase but resources remain static or decline.

Among the most significant economic factors that impact on mature students' learning experiences is the availability of the extra resources that may be needed to assist their learning. Some of these students may require additional tuition, through no fault of their own, having

been out of the full-time higher education system for a prolonged period of time. For others, it may be their first experience of attending college and this can prove very daunting for many students. This was very much in evidence in the findings from the empirical element of this research.

The final, and possibly one of the most important challenges facing the Institute of Technology sector is the ever-increasing level of competition from a variety of academic institutions. These range from other Institutes of Technology, which thus far have tended to have a limited geographic influence. In other words, students are more likely to study in the college which is geographically closest to where they live. However, the development of technological university clusters may have a significant impact on this, which remains to be seen. In addition, there is increased competition from another sector of colleges which provide Department of Education accredited courses to students. Currently, many of these colleges only offer courses at a level that is lower than either the institutes of technology or the universities. In addition, it is the practice of many Institutes of Technology to work with these colleges in order to provide the next level of education to their students, so when the student finishes their course in these colleges, they can transfer directly into the next level of the course in the institutes of technology. This practice gives the Institutes of Technology an advantage over the university sector. In addition, in the context of this research, many of these students are mature, having chosen initially to do a course at a lower level in order to assess their suitability, aptitude and ability to achieve its learning outcomes. This often means that these students, once they transfer into Institutes of Technology, will be more likely to engage in transformative learning.

A final source of competition of which all colleges must be aware is colleges outside of Ireland. These colleges may attract a number of Irish students, for a variety of reasons, which may lessen the pool of potential students from which the Irish colleges can draw. However, one major advantage of providing globally accessible education with comparable learning outcomes and academic standards, particularly to non-EU students is that they must pay fees to attend Irish colleges. This is an increasingly utilised mechanism for fundraising while at the same time allowing the Irish students to experience interactions with other cultures and influences without having to travel to that country and as many of these students are older than the traditional Irish school-leaver, there is also the potential for transformative learning.

The ultimate implications of these influences, are, therefore that in times of economic prosperity colleges are in a better position to cater to ever increasing mature student numbers which arise from government policy. The development of technological universities from the

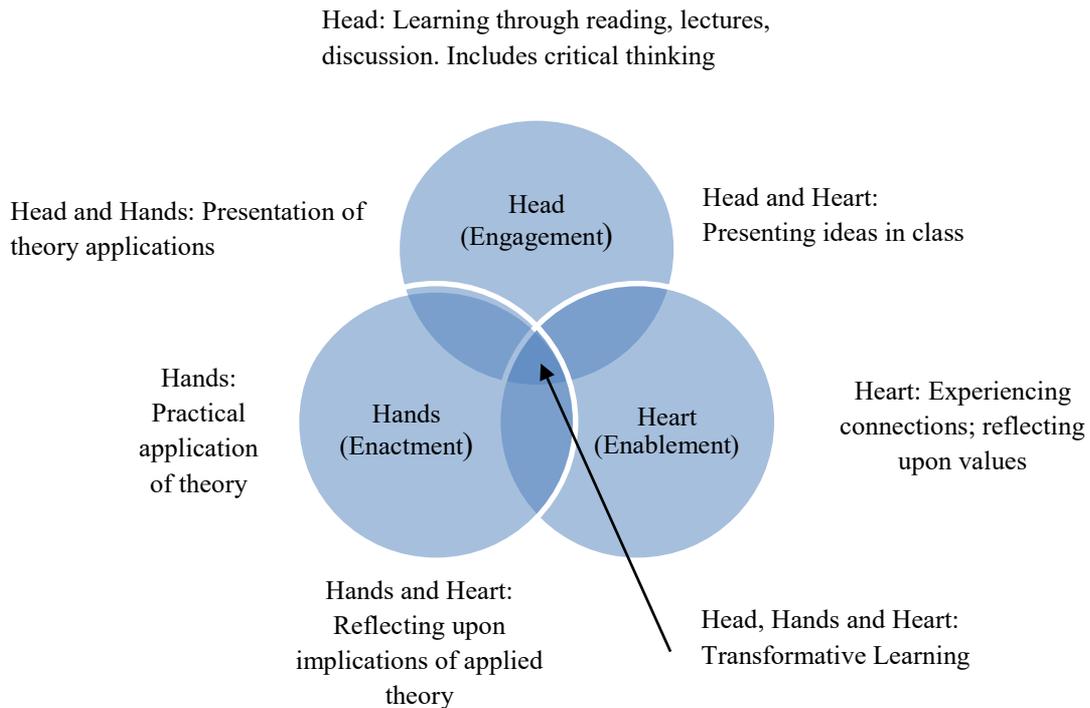
sector may well have the effect of reducing the level of competition in the sector. However, with continuously increasing student numbers, this will bring its own issues to be addressed.

This model highlights the benefits of applying a broad approach to the exploration of mature student learning experiences. It serves to demonstrate the multi-dimensional composition of learning, which is comprised of thinking, feeling and doing. These elements are represented using the 3H Model, with the three interacting elements of head, heart and hands. The specific application and expansion of the model in this research provides an additional original contribution to the research, as described in the following section.

### **5.3 Using the 3H Model to Conceptualise Mature Students' Experiences**

Head, hands and heart is essentially shorthand for engaging cognitive, psychomotor and affective learning domains (Bloom et al, 1964). Integrating learning processes rooted in participants' heads (cognitive domain; engagement, e.g. through academic study and understanding of sustainability and global citizenship), hands (psychomotor domain; enactment of theoretical learning through practical skill development and physical labour (e.g. building, painting, planting), and hearts (affective domain; enablement of values and attitudes to be translated into behaviour e.g. developing a learning community with individual and group responsibilities). The goal of this integration is to effect what Hauenstein (1998) refers to as the behavioural domain, the ultimate goal of transformative learning.

**Figure 5.3 The 3H Model of Mature Student Experiences**



#### 5.4 Towards a Holistic Approach to Supporting Transformative Learning

A wide array of perspectives on transformative learning was explored in Chapter 2. This theory then informed my choice of both Mezirow's phases of transformative learning and the 3H Model for use in both the reflective accounts and photo elicitation interviews, as described in Chapter 3. From these applications of transformative learning theory, it is apparent that serious consideration needs to be given to widening the perspective of the concept as it applies to mature students.

According to Piercy (2013), "Mezirow's dialogue concerning adult transformative learning theory continues to spark discussion." From Mezirow's perspective, learning entails adults engaging in critical reflection on their current frames of reference (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). In addition to critical reflection, the importance of reflective discourse with other adults is also recognised. Merriam (2004) argued that critical reflection necessitated a superior level of cognitive development that was beyond the capabilities of many adults. As a result, Merriam called for an expansion of transformative learning theory to "include more 'connected', affective and intuitive dimensions. Other researchers have participated in this debate. Baumgartner (2001) outlined four approaches used by researchers, namely Freire's emancipatory approach, Mezirow's cognitive-rational approach, Daloz's developmental approach, and Dirkx and Healy's spiritual approach. Each of these provides insights into transformative learning.

However, the inclusion of a spiritual dimension in the learning process exposes opportunities for the development of a whole person approach to adult learning. A comprehensive examination of spirituality in learning necessitates an appreciation of the nature of adult learners and their learning patterns, as well as an understanding of spirituality and its potential role in education. This, then, allows for an understanding of and appreciation for a whole-person approach to the transformative learning process.

Schauffele and Baptiste (2000) present the view that human nature comprises at least four realms: physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual. This perspective reflects that of Dewey who conceptualises the whole person as comprising elements of intellectual, social, moral and physical (as cited by Schauffele & Baptiste).

According to Schauffele and Baptiste (2000), adults learn and come to know information through any single or a combination of these four realms. As mature students begin to use these realms as means of learning, they then begin to increasingly integrate that knowledge into their everyday lives. Therefore, it is critical to acknowledge the importance of including whole person learning as part of learning theory.

Learning may be defined, in its simplest form, as a change in behaviour (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). However, in a broader sense, learning involves the development of "repeatable strategies which are habitually acted upon in order to achieve what the subject perceives to be the best possible ends" (Schauffele & Baptiste, 2000, p.451). Key differences between learning theories are identifiable when exploring the significant factors for identifying the optimum outcome.

Every learning theory examined appears to assume that either learning takes place as an external process between learners and their environment or as an internal psychological process of gaining and developing insightful information (Illeris, 2003). If one accepts Schauffele and Baptiste's (2000) model, with its four dimensions then it is necessary to approach with a theory that facilitates multiple learning dimensions.

There would appear to be no single, commonly agreed definition of what constitutes spirituality, which I would argue, is a fourth and currently absent element of the 3H model. In keeping with the use of the letter 'H' in the model, I have referred to this element as 'higher power'. However, drawing from a number of sources, including Tisdell (2008), Hill & Johnston (2003), Mulqueen & Elias, (2000) and Zeph (2000), a working definition of spirituality might incorporate the search for "life-meaning and self-awareness demonstrated through efforts to achieve the common good for all" (Piercy, 2013, p. 32).

English (2000) highlighted three elements of spiritual development as it related to adult learning. First, is a strong sense of self. As such, spiritual self-awareness involves an appreciation for what one believes in, cares about and values (Zohar, 2005). As shown in the empirical findings of this research, mature students returning to full-time education frequently develop relationships with other mature students. These provide them with opportunities to develop "a strong sense of self, which is integral to spiritual development" (English, 2000, p.30).

Dirkx (2001) also connected spirituality and a sense of self by arguing, "personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and is derived from the adults' emotional, imaginative connection with the self and with the broader social world" (p.64). As shown in Appendix F, adults returning to full-time education often describe their experience using words depicting emotion. This suggests that emotions and feelings of fear significantly impact the adult's sense of self and indeed the learning process, more broadly. However, these feelings may also serve to assist mature students in their spiritual development.

English's (2000) second element of spiritual development comprises caring, concern and outreach to others. Individuals who are highly spiritually developed recognise the importance of taking responsibility and caring for others (Hill & Johnston, 2003; Zohar, 2005). In addition, English contends that, as described by Zeph (2000), spiritual development creates a level of awareness among adults that some entity greater than themselves exists.

The third element of spiritual development highlighted by English (2000) involves the continuous construction of meaning and knowledge. As mature students develop a better understanding of their lives, they become increasingly aware that "life is greater than...[their] sphere of influence and that ... [their] future is bound up with that of others" (English, 2000, p.30). Fowler's (1974) work, as well as that of Belenky, Clinchy, Basseches and Keegan and Mulqueen and Elias, in the area of faith development found a similar connection between spiritual and cognitive development. In addition to the views expressed by English, Fowler's (1974) work in the area of faith development provided a link between spiritual and cognitive development.

Educators often overlook the importance of human spirituality (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2002). However, I would argue that it is a necessary component of a whole-person approach to adult education. As a result, educators would be well advised to view spiritual dimensions of human

nature as they would cognitive dimensions. The question then becomes; how might this be done?

Cranton (2002) identified seven guidelines for establishing a learning environment which promotes transformative learning including:

1. An activating event that exposes a gap between the person's assumptions and their experience.
2. Articulating assumptions which have been uncritically accumulated.
3. Critical self-reflection, through the examination of assumptions.
4. Openness to alternative perspectives.
5. Engaging in discourse where knowledge is constructed by consensus.
6. Revising assumptions to make them more justified.
7. Acting on revisions in ways that match transformed assumptions or perspectives (p.66).

While it should be noted that there are no specific teaching methods that guarantee transformative learning (Cranton, 2002), these methods are easily adaptable for the development of a strategy that includes a spiritual dimension in education.

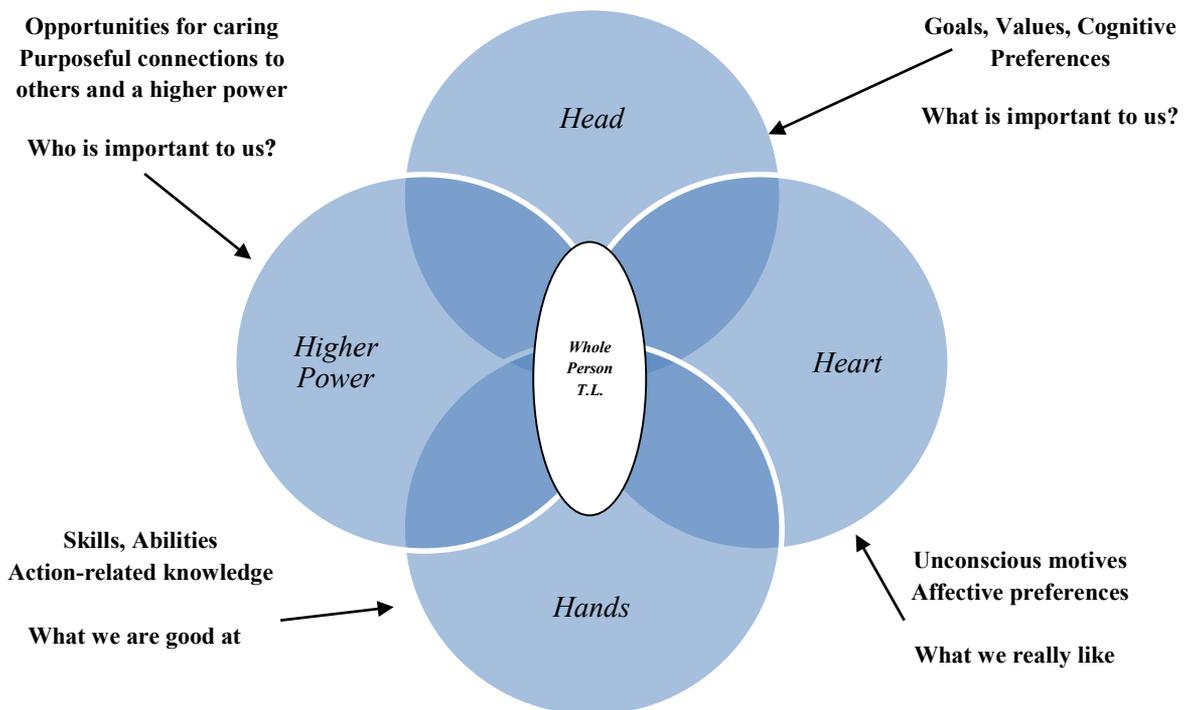
Another key strategy for enhancing spirituality in education is the use of images. According to Dirkx (2001), *"emotions are often associated with voices or images that emerge within an individual's consciousness"* (p.65). As adult learners go about their daily lives, images can help to bridge the gap between the outside world and spiritual dimensions. These images often communicate deeper issues and feelings beyond human reason (Dirkx, 2001). Considerable and highly commendable work on the impact and influence of images has been done by my research supervisor, Natasa Lackovic (2010, 2018) and this impact of using images as a support to text is one of the key reasons I chose to use photo elicitation interviews in my empiricism.

A third method for reaching deeper into the thoughts and views of mature students is by using journals, narratives and reflective accounts, which I also used in this research. These methods provide a mechanism for mature students to document and describe pivotal moments in their lives and this in turn assists them in making meaning out of their experiences.

Other less formal learning strategies suggested by English (2000) are mentoring, which facilitates learners and lecturers becoming partners in the learning process, self-directed learning, which provides mature students with the chance to apply their learning to their own lives. English's third informal learning strategy which enhances spiritual development involves engaging in dialogue, which provides for meaningful interactions between mature students and lecturers.

Based on this discussion of the importance of a spiritual, or higher power element in the lives of mature students in order to achieve whole person learning, Figure 5.4 below shows my 4H Model of Whole Person Transformative Learning.

*Figure 5.4 4H Whole Person Transformative Learning Model*



In the next section, the final conclusions are drawn from the totality of this research and this is followed by the identification and explanation of a number of recommendations that are designed to enhance the potential of transformative learning among mature students in an Irish higher education context and other related domains.

## **5.5 Final Conclusions**

As described in Chapter 1, educators and policy makers, both locally and internationally would seem to be in general agreement that engagement in lifelong learning has advantages for those who take part in education and for the wider society (Laal and Salamati, 2012). Target figures for percentage of mature students participating in full-time higher education have been generated and policies to implement plans for targeting these individuals have been developed by many countries. However, from an Irish perspective, research has clearly shown that the levels of mature student participation in full-time higher education increase during challenging economic times and decrease during periods of economic prosperity. While this is understandable, it provides academic institutions with the challenge of implementing government policies. One solution to this in recent years has been the provision of short-term courses, as well as on-line training that are directly linked to specific jobs or professions and are backed by employers. However, this remains an on-going challenge, in an ever-more competitive academic environment.

Understanding the reasons why mature students choose to return to full-time education and the unique challenges they face will bring some clarity to this situation and may well provide guidance on how best to attract these individuals. The much anticipated potential formation of further clusters of academic institutions such as the Connacht-Ulster Alliance will also increase the accessibility to full-time higher education for mature students and this, in turn, will increase the potential pool of students for the colleges.

In order to gain a better appreciation for mature student learning, a range of learning theories was explored in Chapter 2. This research demonstrates that learning is a complex phenomenon based around theories including constructivism, andragogy and transformative learning. Many of the theories of education have their foundations in sociology and social psychology. From the literature reviewed here, it is clear that there is no single way in which every student learns. In addition, there is evidence that while there is disagreement among researchers regarding the merits of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, many researchers, instead of establishing their own investigations, merely assume that the findings of Mezirow's theories will be equally applicable in other, unrelated contexts. This lack of original research is quite concerning. The inclusion of the 3H Model provided an additional dimension to this research and an interesting perspective on the variety of ways that mature students engage their head, heart and hands during the course of their learning.

Chapter 2 introduced a wide range of studies and many of these investigated how personal development was assisted from a variety of perspectives (e.g. Freire, Vygotsky, Boyd), not exclusively Mezirow's and in a variety of environments and contexts, not solely higher education institutions. Based on the apparent increased levels of interest, it is critically important, to main this momentum, that a number of new directions of research for transformative learning theory are identified and pursued. Among these should be research that focuses on understanding in far greater detail than ever before, the inherent complexities of transformative learning. In addition, future research should engage a wider range of research designs and methodologies. Also of great importance and benefit would be research that investigates more thoroughly transformative learning as a viable model for teaching adults. As shown in this research, it is extremely difficult to state with certainty that any given individual has achieved transformative learning, purely based on a subjective evaluation of whether they have met the criteria specified in Mezirow's ten phases. If Mezirow's theory of adult learning and transformative learning more generally is to remain of relevance and significance to adult educators, it must continue to inform them in terms of how they can improve their teaching both practically and theoretically for the benefit of all students.

In beginning to address the apparent lack of original research on transformative learning, this research involved the use of a number of innovative research methods including reflective accounts and photo elicitation interviews, as described in Chapter 3. Evidence of mature student interest in this topic, and how this research might enhance the learning experiences for mature students in the participant colleges and beyond, was found in the very high response rate achieved for this research. As shown in Chapter 4 and Appendix F, the reflective accounts demonstrated a great willingness of students to participate. In addition, using the photo elicitation interviews provided an interesting perspective on how mature student respondents engaged with images, in addition to verbal interactions.

The integration of the government policy with the theories of adult learning in conjunction with the empirical research I conducted, using a number of innovative methods, have provided a very interesting insight into mature student experiences and challenges. This was not only from the perspective of transformative learning, but indeed in terms of whole person learning. This inspired my expansion of the 3H model, to create a 4H model which included a higher power influence, which was much in evidence from the participants in this research.

In the years since transformative learning emerged as an area of study in adult education, it has received more attention than any other adult learning theory and it continues to be of interest.

This is particularly the case when it comes to the study of transformative learning as defined by Mezirow (1991a, 1995, 1997). Studies of transformative learning cover a broad range of areas, initially focusing on the relationship of transformative learning and adult lifestyle and career changes. These are followed by research of its essential components, such as critical reflection, context and other ways of knowing. There is at present, an emphasis on how transformative learning can be fostered in an educational setting. However, the discussion has resided predominantly in a theoretical domain, with little attention offered from an empirical perspective.

In the last decade there has been an increased interest in understanding how transformative learning can be fostered in an educational setting. It is important to note that many of these studies looked at how personal change was facilitated from a variety of perspectives (e.g. Freire, Vygotsky, Boyd), not exclusively Mezirow's and in a variety of settings, not just classrooms. With this increased interest in mind, it is imperative that we set a new direction of research for transformative learning theory that focuses on understanding with greater depth its inherent complexities. That will then engage a wider range of research designs and methodologies and will investigate more thoroughly transformative learning as a viable model for teaching adults.

If this theory of adult learning is to remain of significance to mature student education, it must continue to inform adult educators in ways they can improve their practical and theoretical teaching. Equally, in order to better understand the experiences of mature students, I would suggest expanding the perspective to one of whole person learning. This will lead to improved mutual understanding between policy-makers, lecturers and mature students, with benefits for all concerned.

From the conclusions of this research, a number of recommendations have been identified, resulting from the discussions in this chapter. The final element presents a number of recommendations for further research on the broad theoretical area of transformative learning.

## 5.6 Recommendations to Enhance Transformative Learning Potential

In this section, I build on the findings and conclusions of the thesis and present recommendations which have the potential to encourage transformative learning among mature students in Irish institutes of technology. These recommendations are categorised as involving institutional policy, pedagogy and possible future directions of research and explanations are provided of how these might be achieved and the role of academic staff and others in their accomplishment.

### Institutional Policy

**Recommendation 1: Lecturers' Attentiveness to Mature Students.** Lecturers should aim to be attentive to, and where possible assist, in the transformative learning element of full-time mature students' education. Recognition and acknowledgement by academic staff of the unique challenges faced by mature students returning to full-time higher education would help mature students to apply their broader life experiences to their academic endeavours.

**Recommendation 2: Institutional Strategy Focus.** Institutional managers and heads of function should make efforts to increase the number of full-time mature students, as this group is frequently the one most likely to seriously consider their third-level educational options and apply themselves to their learning. This would be done at a School level, whereby specific targets are set for mature student participation in each course and groups are established from within the academic staff to develop strategies to appeal to mature students who wish to pursue fulltime higher education. There is also the potential for institutions to develop further courses which are aimed at meeting the specific needs of mature students who may not have participated in full-time education for a considerable period of time.

**Recommendation 3: Enhanced Sense of Inclusion.** Student services groups, lecturers need to engage with all students at the beginning of each academic year should support each other to ensure that full-time mature students feel included in the totality of the full-time student experience. Many mature students expressed the view that they feel they have nothing in common with their younger classmates and this increases their feelings of isolation.

**Recommendation 4: Provide Barrier Management Advice.** There are currently financial advice and counselling services available in many colleges. However, mature students may not be aware of these and how specifically they can be of use and help to them. Student services supports should be put in place to assist full-time mature students in overcoming or at least

effectively managing the external barriers that they identified in this research. The providers of such services, in conjunction with Student Services, need to identify ways in which mature students can be supported for the duration of their college experience and potentially beyond, as they enter or re-enter the workforce.

***Recommendation 5: Contribution Encouragement.*** Course co-ordinators and lecturers should encourage full-time mature students to contribute to all course-centred activities. This will enhance their levels of confidence in their own ability. In addition, due to their differing life experiences, as compared to traditional school-leavers, mature students provide invaluable insights into real-world applications of theoretical concepts.

***Recommendation 6: Lifelong Learning.*** Full-time mature students need to be encouraged to continue with their learning once they have completed their current course. At an institutional level and within each School or Department, the functional managers and lecturers should encourage full-time mature students to consider their academic path beyond their present area of study. The focus of Institutes of Technology on encouraging an ethos of lifelong learning among its students should also be emphasised.

***Recommendation 7: Technological Support.*** Technical support staff and lecturers should use targeted laboratory instruction sessions and individualised tuition to support full-time mature students' needs and ensure they are capable of using information communications technology in an effective manner. This, in turn, would increase their confidence and enhance their opportunities of transformative learning.

***Recommendation 8: Seek Timely and Formative Feedback.*** In many colleges, student feedback forms are distributed by lecturers and course co-ordinators at the end of each semester. These currently tend to be of little relevance to mature students in terms of their content. However, this mechanism, if tailored correctly to reflect the concerns of mature students, would provide very useful feedback that could then be used to improve mature student experiences going forward. Full-time mature students should be asked to provide timely and detailed feedback about their experiences to enhance course offerings both their own benefit and for that of future mature students.

## **Andragogy & Pedagogy**

**Recommendation 9: Engagement of Mature Students in Active Learning.** Academic managers at all levels of the organisations have a significant role to play in engaging mature students as active learners, which is a key to the achievement of transformative learning. In practical terms, this involves moving to a pedagogical model that facilitates differing ways of learning. This could be achieved through the use of smaller class sizes which would facilitate more direct interaction between lecturers and students as well as by lecturers providing a variety of options to mature students in terms of how the learning outcomes for a particular module might be achieved. While initially heads of function may be more concerned about maximising resource utilisation, the resulting enhancement of mature students' learning experiences may provide a convincing argument.

**Recommendation 10: Broaden the Range of Offerings to Non-Cognate Areas.** Currently, Schools within Institutes of Technology have minimal levels of inter-School provision of modules. One clear alternative in this regard is for Schools within colleges to work together, such that students could avail of module offerings regardless of where they were physically situated. This would allow students from the School of Business to take classes which were more traditionally taken by Engineering or Science students. This, in turn, would increase the students' engagement with their learning, while creating a student profile that might be more attractive to potential employers. While this would require close co-ordination between Schools, the potential benefits to the students would far outweigh any logistical challenges.

**Recommendation 11: Encourage Students to Use Reflective Journals.** Lecturers and course co-ordinators should encourage their students to use reflective journals. This research shows the value of providing students with the means and opportunity to identify and describe issues that are of particular concern to them through the use of reflective accounts. Due to the fact that students are required to attend classes for either a semester or a full academic year, this idea could be further expanded through the use of reflective journals. This would allow both traditional and mature students to track their progress through an academic year or even an entire course and to assess their own progress over a prolonged period of time. This would provide mature students with a secure mechanism through which they could express their innermost thoughts, feelings and concerns.

**Recommendation 12: Photo Elicitation Interviews.** Lecturers should use photo elicitation as a means of providing an alternative mechanism for teaching their students. As demonstrated in this research, the use of photo elicitation interviews allows mature students to identify and acknowledge the challenges they face in a manner that is non-confrontational. The acceptance that they may not always achieve exactly what they anticipated, whether for better or worse, provides a valuable learning mechanism for both traditional and mature students. It would allow them to view struggles as a key element of their academic journey and potentially make them more willing to engage positively with feedback from their peers and lecturers.

**Recommendation 13: Take a More Holistic View of Teaching and Learning.** This process could be undertaken by individual lecturers who would then devise innovative assessment methodologies to assess defined learning outcomes. This recommendation stems from the original 3H Model of transformative learning described in this research involving the integration of thinking, feeling and doing. My expansion of the model to include the element of a 'higher power', thereby creating the 4H Model provides great potential for both mature and traditional students to embrace a more holistic view of their learning experience. This, in turn, would facilitate lecturers' efforts to harness the interests of every student in their classes, whether by mature or traditional school-leaver students, so as to maximise the learning experiences for all students.

**Recommendation 14: Increase the Use of Field-trips.** Lecturers should arrange field-trips for students based on key topics of interest. This would allow mature students to enhance their critical thinking skills by exploring how theory is applied in a real-world context. This has the added benefit of allowing students to reflect more on their own needs and interests as learners. In order to achieve this, the lecturer must revise their perception of their own role in student learning from one of being course content focused to being more actively involved in the learning of their students by developing their own critical thinking, goal setting and reflection skills in order to encourage these in their students.

The final element of this section identifies and explores a number of recommendations, based on possible future directions of research.

## **Possible Future Directions of Research into Mature Students' Experiences**

**Recommendation 15: Further Third-Level Based Research Needed.** Researchers both within and external to the Irish Institute of Technology sector need to undertake further research on the experiences of full-time mature students. This research could then be expanded to the university sector to explore what might be done to improve the learning experiences of their full-time mature students.

**Recommendation 16: Mature Student-Driven Participatory Research.** Mature students themselves should be encouraged to become more aware of their learning experiences and processes. This would be achieved through research involving students, lecturers, heads of function and student support personnel.

**Recommendation 17: Longitudinal Study of Transformative Learning.** Researchers in Institutes of Technology should identify historical insights provided by individuals on their learning experiences and explore how these may have progressed over time and the reasons for such developments. Significant insights could be gained from undertaking a longitudinal study. This would have the benefit of tracking mature students' transformative learning experiences without relying on the accuracy of their recollections.

**Recommendation 18: Exploring Novel Research Designs and Data Collection Methods.** Both students and academics could be actively involved in the development of new research designs and data collection methods that would assist in identifying and tracking student learning. Currently, the predominant research designs and data collection methods applied to transformative learning studies have been qualitative and most of these studies have been conducted after the transformative learning experience is considered to have taken place. This can result in serious research limitations, particularly for mature students attempting to clearly recollect specific events, kinds of learning, and self-reflection. While some of the more recent longitudinal studies have made great headway in addressing these concerns, there needs to be an increase in these types of studies.

**Recommendation 19: Research on the Role of Technology.** Research should be undertaken that would involve co-ordination between information technology support personnel, lecturers and mature students with a focus on technology and its role to impact on transformative learning practices. An interesting aspect of this would be the exploration of whether technology facilitates, impedes or potentially has no role in mature students' achievement of transformative

learning. This research could initially be undertaken on a small scale, within the Institute of Technology sector and then extrapolated to incorporate universities in Ireland and beyond.

***Recommendation 20: Consider On-line Learning Environments.*** Lecturers and researchers within institutes should explore the possibility of achieving transformative learning in an on-line setting. With increasing use of and reliance on technology, both in an academic environment and in the workplace, more and more students are availing of the opportunities to undertake on-line study. Thus the aim of this research would be to explore the impact on the achievement of transformative learning for students involved in either blended learning or on-line learning and to compare the findings with those from full-time mature students.

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## Appendix A: Sample Emailed Letter to Registrars

<<Name of Registrar>>  
<<Registrar>>  
<<Name of Institute of Technology>>  
<<Address 1>>  
<<Address 2>>

School of Business  
Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology  
Dublin Road  
Galway

23/1/17

### **RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study**

Dear Registrar,

I am currently enrolled in the Ph.D. in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement programme at Lancaster University, and am in the process of writing my thesis. I am also a full-time lecturer in the School of Business at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. My study is entitled: From Disorientation to Reintegration: An Exploratory Investigation of Mature Students' Engagement in Transformative Learning.

I am requesting permission to conduct research with a number of undergraduate mature students from your institution by forwarding this letter to all full-time mature students currently registered in <<name of institute>>. They will be asked to anonymously complete a short reflective account (copy attached). The reflective account should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete. The survey results will be pooled for my thesis and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. No costs will be incurred by either <<name of institute>> or the individual participants. I will of course make the research findings available for use by I.T. Sligo, should you require same.

Your approval to conduct this study would be greatly appreciated. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have. You may contact me at my e-mail address: [andrea.moloney@gmit.ie](mailto:andrea.moloney@gmit.ie).

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Andrea Moloney, Ph.D. Candidate at Lancaster University

*Attachments: Students' Research Participation Invitation; Participant Consent Form; Reflective Account*

## Appendix B: Sample Research Participant Letter

Dear Research Participant,

As a Ph.D. student in Higher Education at Lancaster University and a lecturer in Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, I am asking interested people to volunteer to participate in my dissertation study. The Registrar of << Name of Institution >> has kindly given me permission to request your participation for this research. Your lecturers or other staff members in the college will not know if you choose to participate in the study or not.

I am interested in communicating with people who have experienced changes in their attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, relationships, or actions resulting from attending college as a mature undergraduate student. I want to learn how you understand and make meaning of these experiences. In my dissertation research, I will analyse whether or not the understandings and meanings from some or all of the research participants adheres to our current understanding of Transformative Learning.

I will be emailing you a document based on a data collection method called a reflective account. This is a personal reflection of your learning experiences. You are asked to answer a total of 10 questions. The process will take approximately 20 minutes of your time. The research data will be stored and evaluated in a way that will prevent your responses from being connected to you.

In addition, you may choose to withdraw from this study at any time, without any penalty and all of your data will be removed from the study and destroyed.

Yours sincerely,

Andrea Moloney

# Reflective Account

## Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research, which aims to explore your own personal learning experiences as a mature student in this college.

This research explores the concept of Transformative Learning. This is a 10 stage process developed by Jack Mezirow over the past three decades.

Each of the stages will be identified and explained in the context of its application to mature students. You will be asked to describe your own experiences in each stage of the process. Please provide as much detail as possible and use examples to explain your thoughts.

You can write about a positive or negative event that you experienced, what it means or meant to you, and what you may have learned from that experience.

All of your information will be kept confidential and any personal statements used in the research will be quoted anonymously.

## Appendix C: Sample Reflective Account

### 1. A disorienting dilemma:

This involves a situation that forces the learner to see that his or her current preferences or frame of reference is not working effectively. Here you are being asked to describe the circumstances under which you decided to go to college as a mature student.

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### 2. Self-examination:

This involves dealing with feelings of guilt or shame and self-examination to explore what he or she did wrong and what he or she could have done differently. Here you are being asked to describe your own role in the circumstances that lead to you deciding to go to college as a mature student.

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### 3. A critical assessment of assumptions:

One must become critically aware of one's own assumptions and make them explicit. Here you are being asked to think about what assumptions you made about your changed situation including your decision to go to college and whether or not, in hindsight, those assumptions were accurate and realistic once you made the decision to go to college as a mature student.

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### 4. Relating Discontent to Others:

Recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. Here you are being asked to examine whether you recognised that others may have gone through similar experiences and what, if anything you learned from them as a mature student.

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## 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions:

Building confidence in how you conduct yourself and in your interactions with others and examining new ways of acting in and reacting to specific situations. Here you are being asked to explain whether and how your new situation changed the ways in which you yourself act and how you interact with others, in addition to how you now deal with certain situations you may or may not have had to deal with before you started in college as a mature student.

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## 6. Planning a course of action:

This entails making a definitive plan on how to improve his or her situation. Here you are being asked to look at ways your behaviour might be changed for the better as a result of your decision to go to college as a mature student.

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## 7. Acquisition of knowledge for implementing one's plans:

This stage involves gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to make the changes necessary. Here you are being asked to describe the knowledge and skills you believe you have gained during your time in college as a mature student. In addition, you are asked to explain how you see this knowledge and skills as being beneficial in helping you achieve your career and life plans.

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## 8. Provisionally trying out new roles:

This helps to identify areas of comfort and discomfort as well as strengths and challenges. Here you are being asked to consider what new professional roles you are now considering taking on that you would not have considered prior to making the decision to go to college as a mature student.

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## 9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships:

Experiencing new situations increases an individual's ability to deal with new and relatively unfamiliar experiences. Therefore, the more times one tackles specific situations, the more comfortable one begins to feel in many of those circumstances. Here you are being asked to describe ways in which you feel that your competence and self-confidence may have increased in a variety of situations as a result of deciding to go to college as a mature student.

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## 10. Reintegration:

The final stage involves a reintegration of one's newly acquired skills and knowledge into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. Here you are being asked to explore in what ways your life has changed for the better as a result of your decision to go to college as a mature student.

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***Thank you for your  
participation in this research  
and continued success in your  
college experience.***

## Photo Elicitation Research

### Introduction

Photo elicitation is a technique that allows researchers to insert a photograph into a research interview, whether the researchers supply those photos or participants are asked to bring their own. In either case, the participants are supplied "guiding questions" which help them talk about the photo and/or select their photo. Please read each of the following statements, and choose the photo which you feel best represents your situation in each case.

### 1. A Disorienting Dilemma:

This involves a situation that forces the learner to see that his or her current preferences or frame of reference is not working effectively. Which of the following photos best describes the circumstances under which you decided to go to college as a mature student? Please rank the following pictures 1-6, where 1 is the most important factor and 6 is the least important.



Frustration

Promotion

Redundancy

Bereavement

Finances

Socialisation

### 2. Self-examination:

This involves dealing with feelings of guilt or shame and self-examination to explore what he or she did wrong and what he or she could have done differently. Which of the following photos best illustrates your own role in the circumstances that lead to you deciding to go to college as a mature student? Please rank the following pictures 1-6, where 1 is the most important factor and 6 is the least important.



No Role!












No Role Complacency Under-qualified Work Disputes Boredom Subject Interest

## Appendix D: Sample Photo Elicitation Document

### 3. A Critical Assessment of Assumptions:

An individual must become critically aware of his or her own assumptions and make them explicit. Which of the following photos best identifies the assumptions you made about your changed situation including your decision to go to college and whether or not, in hindsight, those assumptions were accurate and realistic once you made the decision to go to college as a mature student? Please rank the following pictures 1-6, where 1 is the most important factor and 6 is the least important.



Feeling Inadequate



Rote Learning



Too Old



Isolation



New Technology



Affordability

### 4. Relating Discontent to Others:

It is recognised that an individual's discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. Which of the following photos best shows your level of recognition that others may have gone through similar experiences and what, if anything you learned from them as a mature student? Please identify which of the following pictures represents the most important factor for you by placing 1 in the box below it.



Strong Shared Experience



Limited Shared Experience



Don't Know



Limited Different Experience



No common Experience

## Appendix D: Sample Photo Elicitation Document

### 5. Exploration of Options for New Roles, Relationships & Actions:

This means building confidence in how you conduct yourself and in your interactions with others and examining new ways of acting in and reacting to specific situations. Which of the following photos best illustrates how you now deal with certain situations you may or may not have had to deal with before you started in college as a mature student? Please identify which of the following pictures represents you the best by placing 1 in the box below it.



Still Very Confident

More Confident Than Before

No Change

Less Confident Than Before

Still Lacking Confidence

### 6. Planning a Course of Action:

This entails making a definitive plan on how to improve his or her situation. Which of the following photos best describes ways your behaviour has changed for the better as a result of your decision to go to college as a mature student? Please identify which of the following pictures represents the most important factor for you by placing 1 in the box below it.



Far More Organised

Slightly Disorganised

No Difference

Slightly Less

Far More Organised

More Organised

## Appendix D: Sample Photo Elicitation Document

### 7. Acquisition of Knowledge for Implementing Plans:

This stage involves gaining the knowledge and skills needed to make the changes necessary. Which of the following photos best describes the knowledge and skills you believe you have gained during your time in college as a mature student. Which photo best illustrates how you see this knowledge and these skills as being beneficial in helping you achieve your career goals and life plans? Please rank the following pictures 1-5, where 1 is the most important factor and 5 is the least important.

				
<b>Time Management</b>	<b>Organisational Skills</b>	<b>Determination</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Teamwork</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### 8. Provisionally Trying Out New Roles:

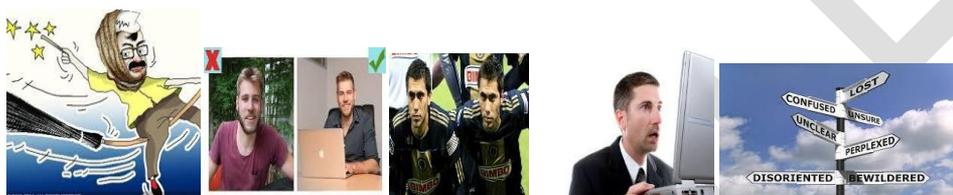
This helps to identify areas of comfort and discomfort as well as strengths and challenges. Which of the following photos best illustrates the new professional roles you are now considering taking on that you would not have considered prior to making the decision to go to college as a mature student? Please rank the following pictures 1-5, where 1 is the most important factor and 5 is the least important.

				
<b>Leader</b>	<b>Subject Expert</b>	<b>Coach</b>	<b>Manager</b>	<b>Same as Before</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>				

## Appendix D: Sample Photo Elicitation Document

### 9. Building of Competence & Self-confidence in New Roles & Relationships:

Experiencing new situations increases an individual's ability to deal with new and relatively unfamiliar experiences. Therefore, the more times a person tackles specific situations, the more comfortable that person begins to feel in many of those circumstances. Which of the following photos best explains how you feel that your competence and self-confidence have increased in a variety of situations as a result of deciding to go to college as a mature student? Please identify which of the following pictures represents the most important factor for you by placing 1 in the box below it.



**Far More  
Competent**

**Slightly More  
Competent**

**No  
Difference**

**Slightly  
Less Competent**

**Far Less  
Competent**






### 10. Reintegration:

The final stage involves a reintegration of a person's newly acquired skills and knowledge into that person's life on the basis of conditions dictated by his or her new perspective. Which of the following photos best demonstrates in what ways your life has changed for the better as a result of your decision to go to college as a mature student? Please rank the following pictures 1-5, where 1 is the most important factor and 5 is the least.



**Family Life**

**Social  
Life**

**Work**

**Learning**

**Health**

## **Appendix E: Sample Interviewee Informed Consent Form**

### **Informed Consent Form**

#### **From Disorientation to Reintegration: An Exploratory Investigation of Mature Students' Engagement in Transformative Learning.**

My name is Andrea Moloney and I am a doctoral student in Higher Education with Lancaster University in the U.K. I am conducting this research study. My research supervisor for this study is Dr Natasa Lackovic.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Andrea Moloney, a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University and a lecturer at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. This research involves the study of mature students' engagement in transformative learning. You have been selected for this study because you are a full-time mature student at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. The Registrar of the college has agreed to allow me to ask for research participants. No one will know who has chosen to participate or who has chosen not to participate in this research.

This study involves a personal interview based on photo elicitation which will take approximately 20 minutes. The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. The consent forms and interviews will be kept separate in locked filing cabinets or on a computer with special encrypted access. Transcripts will be used without any identifying text. All other information will be destroyed.

I will use a pseudonym for you, before using any direct quotes, which might be included in the final research report or published. The results of this research will be published in the researcher's dissertation and possibly in subsequent journals or books.

You may develop greater personal awareness of your own personal and professional learning resulting from your participation in this research. The risks to you are perceived to be none.

## Appendix E: Sample Interviewee Informed Consent Form

You may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after the interview, without negative consequences. Should you withdraw, your data will be eliminated from the study and will be destroyed.

There is no financial reward for participating in this study.

I have read and understand the above and agree to participate in this study.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research.

Andrea Moloney

## Appendix F: Additional Reflective Account Responses

**Q1. A Disorienting Dilemma:** *This involves a situation that forces the learner to see that his or her current preference or frame of reference is not working effectively. Describe the circumstances under which you decided to go to college as a mature student.*

### ✓ Unemployment

- I was let go from my job and since I hadn't any other skills to get a job elsewhere, I was stuck with no option but to go to college as a mature student and improve my skills.
- Lost my job through redundancy.
- I found myself out of work without any skills so nobody was looking to hire me I needed to make myself an expert in some field that there was/would be jobs. I had no ties anywhere and in receipt of social welfare so I could go anywhere to get a qualification.
- Unemployed at the time. Decided to make a career change.
- Forced Redundancy
- Made redundant from job after 24 years. Update skills and fill CV gap. Vast experience in small molecule manufacture very little other experience. Availing of retraining to fill CV gaps.
- Redundancy from 12yrs in a pharmaceutical company. Biopharmaceutical was the growth pharmaceutical industry at the time and still is so I decided to pursue a qualification in that.
- Decided to go back to college as I am being made redundant from my job. I finished my degree in 2004 so thought I needed to improve my educational background.
- Lack of employment in Ireland due to economic downturn and knowing that future employment would be greatly assisted by further education/ qualification
- I was unemployed. I had left school with the Junior Certificate being my highest qualification. I wanted to pave my way towards a career rather than being unemployed or going back to waitressing

### ✓ Lack of Opportunity

- I really didn't think there were any reasonable alternatives for me aside from going to college as a mature student because I was just going around in circles and getting nowhere in my working life.
- The skills I had were becoming obsolete and I didn't want to find myself unemployed
- Because of the economic downturn, I couldn't get work, so I decided that rather than being unemployed or taking just any job, I'd train in an up-and-coming area that I felt sure there would be work in when I graduated.
- with no prospects, so I took voluntary redundancy and went back to college.
- I was working in a job, but I found that I had no way to get promoted without having better qualifications. That's what brought me back to college.
- The area I trained in initially is no longer in demand so I have to re-skill to get a job that is relevant to modern companies.
- I had applied to get a mortgage but I was told that since my wages were so low, I wouldn't be eligible for any kind of mortgage, so that's when I decided to up-skill.

- In my situation I have reached to the highest level of possible achievable grade in the company. Further Senior Management level requires degree in the field of work. This was one of the reasons to pursue further education. However, the main reason is self-satisfaction and pride in knowing that I can do it.
- Basically I hadn't a chance when I was younger.
- I wanted to further my career and getting a degree was part of that development plan.
- In order to progress within my current job, I was required to return to education to gain the necessary qualifications.
- Career progression and security.
- I had been working in a low paying bank job that I hated, and with no prospects or bettering myself.
- Changed Industry 10 years ago and had no qualification in current industry
- Previously had Ordinary Bachelor's Degree, needed to up-skill for job purposes.

#### ✓ **Changing Personal Circumstances**

- I used to think that making money was the most important thing in a job, but then I got sick and it put everything in perspective. I decided my life needed a new direction and that started with going back to college.
- I had planned to go to college when I was younger but then I had my daughter and everything got put on hold while I focused on her needs. Now that she's at school, I thought the time was right for me to go to college.
- My biggest problem when I was at school is that I didn't have the confidence to pick a career that I was really interested in, so I ended up doing nothing.
- All I've ever had were minimum-wage jobs and I was fed up having to struggle just to pay bills and live.
- Having not taken school as seriously as I should have when I was younger I decided at 22 to return as a mature student when I reached 23 to pursue a career that interests me instead of doing a college course at 18 for the social aspect of college.
- I went back to college as I had left work recently (voluntary redundancy) to look after my young children. They started school recently and I was looked for a challenge and something interesting. So I decided to go back to college to study something to help me get back into the workforce in the near future.

#### ✓ **Self-Improvement**

- My main motive for going back to college is to up-skill. I initially trained many years ago and things have moved on since then, particularly in the area of technology, so I want to get a qualification that is relevant in the current and future working environment.
- I had been out of the workforce for very many years rearing my family and I felt the time was right to focus on what I wanted to do for a change.
- Having worked in the same area since I left school, I was bored and not feeling very motivated any more. I just wanted a change and I thought going back to college to learn a new skill would be the answer.

- Nobody in my family had ever gone to college before and I wanted to start a new tradition and expectation for the next generation.
- It was a process which had grown for years. I had children at young age, I had to go to work, but when kids grew up and I lost my job, there was an opportunity to start. So I've done it.
- I had a desire to improve myself, as in past employment I felt because I had no third level education and I was looked upon as not educated and my views were not taken seriously.

**Q2. Self-examination:** *This involves dealing with feelings of guilt or shame and self-examination to explore what he or she did wrong and what he or she could have done differently. Discuss your own role in the circumstances that led to you deciding to go to college as a mature student.*

✓ **Right Time to go Back to College**

- I chose to stay at home when my children were very small.
- I was bored doing the same job year after year.
- I always regretted not finishing what I had started, so once I had recovered and could afford it, I went back to college.
- It was something I had wanted to do since I sat my Leaving Certificate. I had been thinking of doing this course for so long. I decided it was now or never and I didn't want to regret not doing it.
- I chose to go back to college as I feel I would have always wondered if I would have been able to complete a college course successfully.
- I always knew I wanted to go to college. Both of my parents are well educated, so it would have been expected for me to go, but there was no pressure. I knew I'd be able for college but it was just a case of figuring out which course I would be best suited to.
- Having reared my family, I just wanted to do something for me.
- I was bored at home and decided to study something new that I found interesting.
- First time around I allowed my husband of the time to stop me from going to college. Any other time I tried excuses were found to stop me from going
- It was my own choice to go back to college to do what I was interested in

✓ **Unfinished Business**

- Illness forced me to re-evaluate my priorities.
- If I had not had my daughter at such a young age, my life might have been very different but I wouldn't change it for anything at this point.
- The biggest issue for me in going back to college was proving to myself that I was good enough and that I deserved the chance to get a decent job that I enjoyed doing.
- I was undecided what I wanted to do after school.
- I didn't think I was smart enough to get through college when I left school.
- I had no interest in school when I was younger and I stupidly thought I could just get a job without having any formal skills or training.

- I don't want to waste the rest of my life by doing nothing and I like learning new things and having new experiences so going back to college seemed to give me those things.
- Having never received a third level qualification after school it was always something I wanted

#### ✓ **No Option**

- As far as I could see the only way I was going to break the cycle I had created for myself was to get a formal qualification and a decent job.
- I really didn't have many options. I could go from one dead-end job to another or I could go to college and get decent qualifications that would allow me to get a good job, so that's what I did.
- I couldn't get the kinds of jobs I wanted, so I decided to go back to college to retrain.
- I should have seen it coming sooner that what I was doing would soon be out of date.
- It's hard to know, but I suppose if I had more qualifications and experience I might have been able to work in other areas in the company. But as it was I had not options.
- Because the area I worked in had moved on in terms of technology and my skill-set had not, I thought that going back to college would give me a new set of skills and make me better prepared for the modern demands of the workforce.

#### ✓ **What I Did Wrong**

- It would have been easier if I had updated my skills more regularly.
- I should have been more aware that my skills were becoming old and made more of an effort to keep up with changes in work practices.
- I wish I had decided sooner what course to do, but I probably wasn't ready before and I might have dropped out.
- If I had any role in my situation it would be that didn't take advantage of the reskilling courses offered through my job, but at that stage, I didn't have the time and didn't see the need.
- I should have had my own independent income from day one.
- Of course I could have gone to college sooner, but when I was younger, I just didn't see the point.
- While I was at work I was busy and I thought I'd have enough experience to get up the corporate ladder, but it turns out I was wrong.
- It was my own fault that I wasn't qualified but when I left school there were lots of jobs so I didn't think too much about it at the time.
- It's my own fault for not working harder at school.
- I should have gone to college when I was younger instead of relying on someone else to provide for me.
- I wish I had put more effort into studying when I was younger and picked an area that I was really interested in.
- Got too comfortable

**Q3. A Critical Assessment of Assumptions:** *An individual must become critically aware of his or her own assumptions and make them explicit. Explore what assumptions you made about your changed situation including your decision to go to college and whether or not, in hindsight, those assumptions were accurate and realistic once you made the decision to go to college as a mature student.*

✓ **Heavy Workload**

- I thought that my study skills would be very rusty and I didn't know how focused I would be after devoting so many years to raising my child.
- Going to college was not at all what I expected. There was far more to learn and do than I could ever have imagined and a lot more of my time was taken up with college work than I thought would be.
- I really thought things would be the same in college for me this time around as they were before but things had moved on, so I found I was falling behind at the start.
- In no way was returning to college what I thought it would be. The workload is a lot more than I expected, which meant I was required to make a large amount of sacrifices in my lifestyle to allow me enough time to dedicate to the college course so I would be able to pass. Next to no help was offered to me through the college to assist with this.
- College as a mature student is very different to the experience of those that go straight from school. I didn't think the college course would be as labour intensive as it was. In order to do well, the social side of college has to be sacrificed. I'm not sure I would do the same course if given the chance again.
- Coming from such a high pressure job, I thought that doing college work would be very easy, but it turned out to be much more challenging than what I expected.
- I thought maybe it would be hard to get back into studying after being away from education for a while but it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.
- I thought I would manage ok going back to college full-time because I like learning new things. But I don't think I realised how much of a challenge it would be particularly without a steady income.
- To be honest I thought sitting in college all day would be much easier than doing a day's work. But I was wrong. This is much harder than I thought it would be.
- I didn't think I had a chance of passing one exam, because I was never very into studying at school.

✓ **Lack of Commonality with Classmates**

- I knew it would be different and that I'd be older than most of the students there. Fortunately, there were other mature students in the class group.
- Being older than the vast majority of the other students I thought would be very strange, but I was lucky that they welcomed me from day one.
- I really didn't know whether or not I'd be able to keep up with people who were a lot younger than me and who had been brought up with all the new technology I wasn't used to using. After a while though, I got used to it and now I feel like I've always been using it.

- Would the other people think I was stupid for not going to college after school? But nobody said anything like that so it was grand.
- When I decided to go back to college, I didn't give too much thought to whether or not I would have anything in common with my classmates. But I suppose I'm the type of person who gets on well with most people and I can usually fit in with a group.
- At the start I wasn't really sure whether I'd enjoy being in classes with much younger people, but I got used to it quickly and I'm really enjoying it now. I suppose I have the added advantage of not having the pressure of needing to get great results so I can find a good job.
- It really didn't bother me too much to have to go back to full-time education because I'm still young and I knew I wouldn't be much older than most of the other students in the class.

### ✓ **Increased Confidence**

- I assumed I'd struggle in college, because I wasn't very good at school and I just assumed it was because I wasn't very smart. But once I work hard, I've discovered I'm able to do just as well as nearly anybody else in my exams.
- I really hadn't a clue what I was in for when I went back to college. All I did know is that I had no real choice at that point.
- I was really looking forward to making big changes in my life and excited at the prospect of learning new skills and gaining new qualifications.
- I thought I might have a few problems because I had been away from formal education for so long, but I was determined to persevere and it's paying off so far.
- I was really expecting to be lost in the first while at college and I was but it slowly got better and I've settled in grand now.
- Because I hadn't been in college for many years, I really didn't know what to expect, but I thought I might struggle with the more up-to-date methods being used. I was right.
- I was hoping that because I was still young that I wouldn't find it too hard to get back into studying and aside from new changes in technology that I had to deal with, I eventually got the hang of it.
- I was looking forward to the experience of going to college because I felt I missed out on the experience when I was younger. It was hard at the start but I'm really enjoying it now.
- Even though I had no experience of college I thought I wouldn't have a clue what was going on. It was like that at the start but I got used to it fairly quickly.
- Because I wasn't very good at school, I thought I would find it very hard to get through a college course as a mature student. But once I started getting used to the new workload it was ok after a while.
- I thought I wouldn't have a clue what was going on in class, but it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.

**Q4. Relating Discontent to Others:** *Recognition that an individual's discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. Examine whether you recognised that others may have gone through similar experiences and what, if anything, you learned from them as a mature student.*

✓ **Listening to Others**

- Fortunately, there are a lot of other mature students in the college and it's great to be able to chat to them about how they're getting on.
- Lots of other mature students felt that they too needed to up-skill, so it was reassuring to see that I wasn't alone.
- I did meet a few mature students who struggled like me and some people had other issues too that made me feel quite fortunate that I was able to turn things around for myself.
- From talking to other people in the college I don't think I am the only one who still hasn't a clear picture of what I want to do in my life.
- Some others in my class and the college had experiences like mine so we were able to support each other.
- Chatting with teachers and peers/class mates had a biggest impact on me. They helped me to accept my weaknesses and believe in my strengths

✓ **Goals Vary**

- Even though our reasons for coming to college as mature students might be different from one another, there was still a common bond between us that helps us through the challenges that we regularly face. They're more manageable when we work through them together.
- Yes, there were quite a few mature students in the college that started around the same time as me. Everybody had their own life experiences and reasons why they came to college, some for the first time, as mature students.
- I had spoken to friends of mine who were in college straight after school so they were able to tell me their experiences, but it's very different when you're actually going through it yourself.
- I've met quite a few mature students at this point and they all have their own reasons for going back to college. I haven't met anyone yet in my exact situation.
- A couple of others in my class were mature students and even though they were back in college for different reasons to me, we still had it in common that we were older than the rest of the class and so we had life experiences that they didn't.
- There weren't really many others in my situation but there were a lot of mature students who were in college for their own reasons and that was a great support system.
- There were a couple of other mature students in my class and that was helpful because then I didn't feel so alone or isolated.
- It was nice to meet a few others in the class and around the college who were mature students too and we were able to share experiences.

✓ **Engagement**

- I really didn't believe I would have anything in common with most of my classmates, but I find myself learning new things every day from them, in particular about technology.
- It was nice to have other mature students in the class to talk to and I found the other students very approachable too.
- Luckily there were lots of other mature students in the course I chose so that made me feel much better.
- There were a few other mature students in my class and they all had the same experience of feeling lost at the start of the course.
- I've met loads of other mature students, so we've formed a tight group and that's a great support system to have.
- Having spoken to quite a number of mature students at this point, everyone has their own stories, but I think a lot of us share a determination to make the most of the opportunity we've been given this time around.
- There are a lot of mature students in my class and it's interesting to hear their stories. I suppose I have the best of both worlds though because I have a fair bit in common with the younger students too. The one thing I've learned is that I can relate to a lot more people than I thought.
- There's a good support system in the college and I know that there are plenty of other students who have experienced mental health issues and it's good to share experiences with them.

✓ **Time Management**

- I suspect a lot of the mature students were in the same situation as me but we really didn't have the time to discuss it because we were all on a steep learning curve.
- I made the decision early on to put myself totally into my study so I could get the most out of it. From talking to other mature students I think some were there more out of interest and some wanted to improve their chances of getting a better job.
- As the only entrant to final year, I felt very out of my depth and it was only at Christmas that I found out one of my fellow students had come into the 3 year course the previous year. I had put a lot of pressure on myself in not asking questions of others but found that by talking and asking, everyone was more than willing to help out and support.
- I've learned that if you put in the time and effort, are determined enough, anything is achievable.
- Some of the other students, even the young ones struggled with the course at the start, so I was glad I wasn't the only one finding it hard, but it got easier once I settled in a bit more.

**Q5. Exploration of Options for New Roles, Relationships & Actions:** *Building confidence in how you conduct yourself and in your interactions with others and examining new ways of acting in and reacting to specific situations. Examine whether and if so, how your new situation changed the ways in which you act and interact with others. In addition, explore how you now deal with certain situations you may or may not have had to deal with before you started in college as a mature student.*

✓ **Increased Confidence**

- Now that I know I'm able for the course I've signed up to, I am much calmer in how I deal with strange situations.
- When I got sick unexpectedly, I could feel my self-confidence was knocked and I wasn't quite sure what my future was going to be. But once I got better I realised that I was in control of my future so I had to make the most of it.
- I wasn't used to dealing with large crowds of younger people after so long just dealing with parents of very young children, so that was strange at the start. But it was nice too to be able to have more adult conversations that did not revolve around issues like child-care.
- I definitely felt better able to cope with challenges because of having to struggle all my life up to when I started in college.
- I never expected to have to become the bread-winner in the family and go back to college, but that experience made me better able to deal with other unknowns as they came along.
- I had to start believing that I had the right to be in college and that it wasn't just reserved for everyone else. Once I started to believe in myself, things started to fall into place for me.
- When you are successful in your course or are getting good marks, it enhances your confidence levels and allows you to realise this is where you belong. You become more familiar with your surroundings and with age comes experience and how to deal with difficult situations.
- I feel more confident now than I did before and I feel more accepted by others in my class.

✓ **More Organised**

- I was surprised that I was getting good marks and good feedback from lecturers from the start, even though I had been out of formal education for a long time. So that motivated me to try even harder.
- My main motive was to get a good degree and then to get a good job from it. Aside from working with other students on projects, I'm really not interested in the social side of college. So that's no different from my life outside of college.
- It was definitely a wake-up call for me to realise I wouldn't just sail through my college course and it would involve a serious amount of work and commitment on my part and I had to recognise that I couldn't do it all by myself too.
- Because I missed out on going to college with everyone in my class I am much more driven to do it right this time around and not to mess up again.

I realised very fast that I'd have to make the most of going to college because I wouldn't have a hope of getting a job again without a decent qualification.

- Since I had already had a lot of life experiences I didn't really expect to be facing much that was new to me, but looking at how the younger students can deal with their heavy workload has made me more conscious of not wasting time doing things that really don't matter in the long term.
- The biggest change for me was having to learn and understand a lot of different topics in a short time-frame. But being able to manage that really helps me with other things that I do outside of college.

### ✓ **Conflict Resolution**

- I generally get on well with people and I'm not as old as some of the other mature students in the class so I can work well with everybody.
- From the time I decided to go back to college, I wasn't too bothered by having to deal with new situations or people - I see myself as fairly adaptable.
- Going back to college at this stage of my life has definitely made me more open to interacting with different groups in society that I would probably have not had the opportunity to interact with had I not decided to go back to college.
- The biggest change for me was interacting with a lot of people who were a good bit younger than me. Some of them were very immature and that was hard to deal with at the start.
- As a mature student I feel I am not here to make friends and be popular but I still have to be friendly so as to get along with others.
- Since going back to education I definitely have much more respect for the people there and how hard they have to work. Of course there are plenty of dossers, but I'm trying not to mess it up.
- I suppose for me the biggest thing was interacting with so many people at one time from so many different age groups and backgrounds. That made me appreciate the diversity that exists in society a lot more and more tolerant of people who were different from me in any way.
- I'm really enjoying working in groups and hearing the opinions of others as well as sharing my own. either because I'm mostly doing this course to keep my mind active.
- For sure I never had as much interaction with people much younger than me, but it made things more interesting because they had a different way of looking at things.
- Since I started in college, I'm much better at working with other people. Before, I was very focused on how I wanted to do things and what I wanted to do. But in a group you can't be like that.
- Interaction with the other students is very important around group work. This can be challenging but is and continues to be good life lessons and skills in dealing with others of different options personalities and views and learning to be diplomatic to work together

**Q6. Planning a Course of Action:** *This entails making a definitive plan on how to improve his or her situation. Describe ways your behaviour has changed for the better as a result of your decision to go to college as a mature student.*

✓ **Measured Approach**

- I think before I act and I know that I have to consider other people's opinions when we're working on a group project.
- I suppose because I'm older, I'm more set in my ways of doing things, but I'm slowly learning to be more adaptable and consider other ways of doing tasks that might be better.
- Whereas before I would have looked at new situations as something to be afraid of, now I look at them more as challenges and things that I have to get through to get where I want to go.
- I don't make assumptions anymore about how things will turn out. I just work as hard as I can and control what I can and I recognise when there are certain things that are outside of my control and I don't worry too much about them.
- I look at things a lot more different now as I have gained new skills and knowledge. I don't fear new challenges as much as before as I know I have overcome so many difficult obstacles that nothing is impossible.
- I think I'm much more open to new situations than I was before.
- I'm more determined than ever to have a better work-life balance than I had before and I'm more considerate of the opinions of other people, even when they don't match mine than I was before.

✓ **Time Management**

- I don't waste time thinking about the past anymore and I'm focused on setting future goals and achieving them as best I can.
- I am very disciplined with myself mainly because I don't want my family time to be too badly affected by me being in college full time.
- Because I've wanted this for so long, I'm determined to make the best of it that I can and that means putting in long hours and working as hard as I can to get the best qualification I can at the end of it.
- Because I know other people are depending on me not making a mess of it, I'm very focused on my college work, but it does make having a good work-life balance that bit harder.
- I've had to become more focused on what I want and it's definitely important to manage my time better.
- I'm much more focused on details than I was before and I think I'm a better communicator than I was before too.
- Being able to plan and manage my time to suit family responsibilities and academic responsibilities.
- I get everything done as best I can and I keep track of deadlines and I never make excuses for not doing something.

I got very focused very fast. Because the course material was covered very quickly I had to do a lot of extra work myself just to try to keep up. But I think that has meant that I put more effort into other things I do outside of college now too.

✓ **Consideration**

- I tend to think more deeply about things than I did before and that's probably because I waited so long to take the step and go to college.
- I'm definitely more careful in how I do things and I don't jump into doing the first thing that comes into my head like I might have done before.
- The biggest thing for me is that I have to watch what I'm saying much more because I don't want to be getting into trouble for the way someone else might put a spin on something I say.
- I'd certainly say I'm more tolerant than I was before. That's the biggest change I can see.
- I'm certainly more understanding of people and I think my communication skills have improved a lot.
- I'm really enjoying learning about a lot of new things and I think I've become more open-minded. Working with others on projects means I've become a lot more patient too.
- I'm definitely making more of an effort to engage with people around me, not only to get work done for the immediate future but as a means of building my network of contacts for the future.
- I definitely have more patience for dealing with people. I think I'm more likely to ask if I don't know something now than just pretend I know because that doesn't serve any useful purpose in the long run.
- I think I could say I'm more considerate than I was. I know that I could have done things differently in my job and the only person I can control is myself.

✓ **Self-awareness**

- I feel more rounded as a person, because while my daughter is still my priority, I can focus on my college work while I know she is at school or being looked after.
- I think I'm more mature now than I was when I left school, so I take my college work more seriously now than I think I would have before.
- Because I know what I want and I know what I have to do to get it, I'm really focused and single-minded in my efforts, whereas before, I was much more scattered in my approach.
- Once I made the decision to go to college, I knew that there was no backing out and I'd just have to make the most of it and work as hard as I could to keep up.
- My behaviour has changed only slightly I feel. I am slightly more reserved in what I might say. I personally am of the opinion that I am who I am and if you don't like it, that's not my problem. It might be naive but that is how I feel.
- I'm very determined to get the best qualification I can because I feel I missed out when I was younger.
- I'm taking my career prospects much more seriously than I was before.

**Q7. Acquisition of Knowledge for Implementing Plans:** *This stage involves gaining the knowledge and skills needed to make the changes necessary. Please describe the knowledge and skills you believe you have gained during your time in college as a mature student. Explain how you see this knowledge and these skills as being beneficial in helping you achieve your career and life plans and goals.*

✓ **Time Management**

- I'm much more organised with my time now and I'm getting through the workload so far.
- Due to existing family commitments, I have to be very focused during the time I'm working on college material but that helps me get more done because I haven't time to be daydreaming or dossing.
- Being more organised is great because I can still spend quality time with my family and get my college work done.
- Of course I've learned a lot of useful course material but I think just as valuable are the teamwork and time management skills I've developed.
- Organisation and time management skills are the main areas where I have benefited. Also the fact that it is o.k. to ask for help from lecturers or my peers. Communications skills through presentations. Technical skills.
- Because there is so much to be done in a short term of only about 12 weeks I have found that I have to be really focused and organised or else nothing gets done on time.
- Time management is something I've definitely improved at.
- It's really hard to get everything done right and submitted on time so I think I am more focused now than I was before and that has made me think more seriously about my future.
- Studying and being able to manage the work we're being given has made me much more confident and I'm getting better at organising my time and what I have to do.
- Now I'm more aware of how quickly or slowly I am doing something and getting things done and ticked off my 'to do' list gives me the confidence to keep going.
- Being so busy all the time in college between classes, tutorials, practicals and then project work I found it helped to be more organised and that's something I can bring to my new career.
- I suppose when I am thinking more about doing things I could describe myself as being organised. I realise now too that it's very important to be strict with myself, so that's really self-discipline.
- I'm definitely far more organised than I've ever been and now that I've made progress in college, I'm more optimistic about my prospects of getting a decent job to help my family.
- Time management is the biggest thing I have learned.

✓ **Confidence**

- Being in the habit of thinking about things is good because it means that I'm less likely to jump into doing the first thing that comes to mind without considering the consequences.

Being able to handle pressure is a good characteristic for me to be able to bring into the workplace.

- This knowledge and these skills have forced me to be more organised and to just deal with situations as they come up rather than putting everything off and just hoping it would go away.
- I have learned so much not only about what I'm studying but about myself. I'm much better at this like making presentations than I thought I'd be.
- Since I moved to a totally new area of study, I feel like I'm in a much stronger position to take advantage of future opportunities.
- The biggest obstacle for me in going to college was my own self-belief. So once I saw I was able for the course, that encouraged me to work even harder. I think potential employers will see me who has overcome a lot to get into college and then made the most of the opportunity.
- Aside from the technology skills, I think I've learned how to think more independently rather than waiting for someone to come up with the answer for me.
- I can say without any doubt that I will make a very reliable employee who will be very goal focused and do whatever it takes to get a job done.
- I will be able to work with a variety of people with different life stories and I will be much better working on projects with other people too.
- I'm much more confident in my own ability than I was before.
- Juggling work, college and home is a great teacher for time management skill.

#### ✓ **Communication Skills**

- The biggest things I've learned about are using computers and how to make good presentations.
- The most valuable skills I've learned have been presentation skills and I.T. skills. These will be useful to me in a wide variety of careers whatever I choose.
- Diplomacy in dealing with other people will be a good skill to have in the workplace.
- Aside from all the knowledge I'm gaining about what I'm studying, I'm learning to be better with interacting with other people and I'm more able now to give my opinion.
- I would have been more of a loner before I went to college but now I like working with other people in the class on group projects because I see that everyone has their own issues to deal with. Not judging others and being more open in my own opinions should help me when I go looking for a job.
- I can talk in front of a group now.
- Along with the modules, I have gained knowledge in the area of Public Speaking.
- One major benefit for me returning to college is the need to participate in group/individual presentation.
- My communication skills and interpersonal skills have definitely changed for the better. I feel my communication skills have improved greatly.

**Q8. Provisionally Trying Out New Roles:** *This helps to identify areas of comfort and discomfort as well as strengths and challenges. Discuss what new professional roles you are now considering taking on that you would not have considered prior to making the decision to go to college as a mature student.*

✓ **Not Yet Considered**

- I want to make sure that whatever career path I choose in the future I won't be putting myself under so much pressure that I end up getting sick again. So I want a flexible working environment, but I'm not really sure of the specifics just yet.
- I didn't have any expectations of what kind of job I'd like to have before I started college and I'm still not sure. I just know that it has to be something a lot better than what I had before because I've worked so hard for it.
- I'm still trying to find my feet to an extent and keep on top of the workload, but I know I'll soon have to start thinking about where I'd like to see myself career-wise.
- I'm not really thinking too far ahead at the moment, but I'd definitely want to get some type of job that uses what I'm learning in college.
- I don't know.
- Aside from wanting to get a job that would both fit in with my family life and use the new skills and knowledge I have from college, I don't have a particular career in mind.
- I'm not sure yet what kind of area I'd like to work in. I'm just focusing on getting through my exams at the moment.
- I'm not considering any roles because as I said I'm doing the course more out of interest than anything else.
- At the moment, I'm not really sure what type of job I'd like to have after college, but it would have to be something that pays better than what I had before.
- Not sure yet
- College did not change my idea of taking or not taking a particular role
- None, yet
- No new roles at present
- I'm not considering any at this time
- It is a decision that I have not made, although I have considered different options I just want to have a qualification in a certain discipline that if a position arises I will be able to apply.

✓ **Same Role**

- I'd like to work in a similar area to where I worked before, but with more responsibility and better pay.
- Ideally, I would like to work in a similar area to where I was before but using my new IT skills.
- Ideally I'd like to work in a job that is similar to what I had before, but maybe with more responsibility that would then allow me to earn more money.
- I am very happy in my current professional role and it was more to bring my academia up to level with my role that I went back to college.

I would like to work in a similar area to what I was doing before, just maybe at a higher level, to make use of my new, more modern skills.

- I would not have been promoted to an Engineering role within my company if I did not go back to college.
- The roles I am aiming for haven't changed.

#### ✓ **Different Role**

- I think I'd be really good working as part of a team, whereas before I was always used to working more or less by myself.
- I think ultimately I'd like to be my own boss and start my own business. Who knows I might go into business with one or more of my classmates.
- Because my daughter is in school I'd probably like office work that has a clear start and end time. Another option I'd consider would be teaching or eventually lecturing, but I know that would involve getting more qualifications, so I'll see how I get on with finishing this degree first.
- I'm thinking about a variety of options at the moment, including the possibility of starting my own business. That's not something I would ever have considered if I hadn't come back into full-time education.
- I'd like to be a team leader because I think I'd be good at motivating other people, but I know that I'll probably have to work my way up to that and get as much experience as I can first.
- The biggest change will be the area I'll hopefully be working in and if I can progress in that all the better.
- I'm definitely looking at areas that I would have thought were too good for me before.
- I'd like to be a manager of some sort, but beyond that, I haven't really thought about it yet.
- I think I'd be in a good position to think about more senior roles now.
- I haven't really thought that far ahead yet but definitely not what I was doing before.
- I am considering completing a masters after this degree which I wouldn't have considered before. I want to aim for a job that will give me a better standard of living than I had before. I'm not ready to take on a lot of responsibility like as a manager yet, but I'd like to think that someday I'll feel ready.
- I am willing to try any roles now thanks to the confidence gained throughout my life as a mature student
- I would like to move into a management role within my company.
- There are certain areas of work I would not have considered myself liking or doing, but since completing placement through college and learning the skills to take part in areas of work, I would now say my field or potential career has broadened somewhat.
- I feel I would be able to take a higher role in the workplace

### ***Q9. Building of Competence & Self-confidence in New Roles & Relationships:***

*Experiencing new situations increases an individual's ability to deal with new and relatively unfamiliar experiences. Therefore, the more times a person tackles specific situations, the more comfortable that person begins to feel in many of those circumstances. Explain how you feel that your competence and self-confidence have increased in a variety of situations as a result of deciding to go to college as a mature student.*

#### **✓ Self-confidence**

- I probably wouldn't have been confident enough to ask for help before.
- Being able to cope with huge changes and heavy workloads makes me feel self-confident.
- Being able to do the work we are assigned and required to do is a great confidence boost.
- There have been huge challenges so far but I'm met each of them head-on and I'll continue to do that and as a result of that my confidence in my own ability will continue to increase.
- I'm much more sure now that I'm able for the course and that going back to college was the right thing for me to do.
- At first I was clueless when it came to some subjects, particularly the ones involving computers, but now I've used them so much I'm much more comfortable and I'm even able to show other students how to do things now and that's a real confidence boost for me.
- All my life up to starting in college I doubted my own academic ability. But now that I see that all of my hard work is paying off, I feel more self-confident.
- Because of all the project work I'm very comfortable now with speaking in public and explaining things to other people.
- I'm much more likely to try out something now and if it doesn't work one way, I'll try again another way rather than give up altogether like I used to do.
- Being more focused means that I'm definitely more comfortable in my own skin and that makes me more confident to deal with the unknown.
- I have done better than even I expected and that is a good confidence boost. Being able to apply the theory I have learned to my project work shows how my competence level has improved.
- The biggest thing for me is that I don't panic like I used to when I meet a new situation. I just try to relate it to what I already know and then try to work out how best to deal with it.
- I look for other people's inputs before, whereas before I would have made a lot of decisions by myself without reference to anyone else.
- Gaining new knowledge has made me confident that I'm more relevant in my knowledge in terms of how it'll apply to my future career and that will make me better at doing the job.
- Before undertaking this course, I had a lot of self-doubt as to whether I would be able to complete it. Would I struggle too much and pull out? I now have a greater confidence in my ability to achieve things I put my mind to.
- Public speaking: confidence has increased due to the number of presentations completed over my time in college. Computer skills: more confident with Excel and Word. Both very important for a career in my chosen area.
- Since I did that work placement I can see the sense of what I'm learning and that makes me more confident that I'm on the right track.
- I'm more confident working with other students on projects and I think I have more knowledge about a lot of things than I did before I decided to go to college.
- Being able to do new things has boosted my confidence and seeing that I can get good results has helped me too.

- I'm abler to speak my mind now and I've learned how to listen to what other people think too.
- I haven't noticed any confidence increase so far.
- I've learned skills like how to be much more organised with my work and time. I don't think my confidence has increased much. I was always a fairly confident person, but now I suppose I know I can do more things.
- I was always confident, but I'm better now in my interactions with people of all ages and backgrounds.
- Doing college work and getting through the projects on time has made me more confident that I'll be able to finish the course.
- The learning I have completed has definitely improved my confidence in dealing with people and areas where I would not have been comfortable with previously.

### ✓ **Competence**

- I've learned a lot of new skills that I'll be able to use at work and I know how to do things right now where before I might not have been too sure.
- Getting a job done successfully shows my competence.
- Every time I do something new I feel like I becoming more competent and have more to offer a prospective employer.
- I'm definitely more competent - I'm doing things as part of my college course that I never thought I'd be able to do like new product development.
- My I.T. skills are much better and I'm using a lot of different applications now that I didn't know about before, so that will look good on my C.V.
- I can do far more things than I could do before, like work with strangers on projects and get through difficult exams so I definitely feel better in myself when I achieve those things.
- When I first started doing presentations I was surprised how nervous I was. But after a while I didn't mind them at all.
- I see myself as a good problem-solver. I'd like to think I'm a good team player too.
- My competence in the area of I.T. has improved and as I said before I am more confident in speaking with a wider array of people from different age groups and backgrounds in society.
- I'm much better and more structured in my approach to doing projects. The fact that I can see from my work before how the theory I'm learning relates to what I'm learning means that I'm more competent.
- I work better under pressure and I'm very focused on getting a job done.
- The ability to research and analyse data have increased my competency over this period.
- I know that I know more than I did before and that'll be very useful when I go back to work.
- From doing my college work I know that I am better at doing more things than I thought I was and that's a nice feeling.
- I'm better working with other people now.
- I can do a lot more things now that I couldn't do before and because of that I think I might be more willing to give new things a go outside of college too.
- I know now that I can do things I didn't think I could do before. I'm more willing to try something new now than I used to be.
- I definitely feel more in control of strange situations and I don't feel the same level of anxiety that I did before I went back to college.
- I have learned how to clearly, and concisely put forward what I want to say so that others can understand my thought process.

**Q10. Reintegration:** *The final stage involves a reintegration of a person's newly acquired skills and knowledge into that person's life on the basis of conditions dictated by his or her new perspective. Explore in what ways your life has changed for the better as a result of your decision to go to college as a mature student.*

✓ **Confidence**

- I'm more confident in myself and I know that by the time I finish in college, I'll have a good degree and something very valuable to offer an employer.
- I feel already that I have achieved something and that's what I wanted to do.
- My confidence is back up to where it was before I retired. There's a sense of satisfaction too that I can keep making a positive contribution to society.
- I hope once I finish college that I can encourage future generations of my family and people like me to go to college because they've just as much of a right to get the benefits of a good education as anybody else.
- I think my life has a direction now where before I was just doing the same thing day after day and going nowhere.
- I think being more confident will help me in a lot of ways in my life. Even something like doing grocery shopping will be easier because I will ask if I can't find something.

✓ **Happiness**

- Overall, I'm happier in myself and I have more of a sense of direction to my life than before.
- I feel much more complete and fulfilled now. It's nice to do something for myself for a change.
- I'm far happier and more content now that I'm studying an area I'm really interested in.
- I believe I'm more sociable than before I went back to college and I'm a better listener too because I appreciate that other people might have an opinion that is different from mine that is equally valid and deserves to be heard.
- I have a renewed sense of self-worth. I know I can do better than what I was doing and I have the skills now to achieve whatever I set my mind to.
- I'm happier than I was. I'm more confident in my abilities and I have more of a sense of direction now than I had before.
- Personally my life has changed in so many ways. I have relocated, I have married, my lifestyle choices have changed for the better (I think). I feel happier in general.
- I feel happier in my own skin and more accepting of my situation and knowing that there are some things I can change and some that I can't.
- I'm very happy that I took this step at this stage in my life.
- I'm very happy that I decided to go to college as a mature student and looking back, I mightn't have made such a good go of it when I was younger, because I might have taken it for granted, but now I don't.

### ✓ **Work-life Balance**

- I'm definitely more conscious of how my life can change very quickly so I'm aware of what I do and why I'm doing it much more than I used to be.
- I have a much better college-life balance than I had before and that will be good for my daughter. I'm a better role model for her too so she can see what will be possible for her to do in the future.
- I feel like I have a new lease on life and I'm looking forward to seeing what the future holds.
- I feel like a more rounded person now and I'm not afraid of taking on any professional challenges I'll face in the future.
- I know what I want now - a decent job and a good life.
- Aside from having a positive effect on my job prospects, I think the skills I have learned and am learning in college will make a lot of things easier like online shopping or using social media.
- I'm delighted that I decided to take on such an interesting course and being out of the house in college gives me a better work-life balance than just sitting at home.

### ✓ **Opportunities**

- I think going back to college has provided me with a huge number of opportunities I would never have had otherwise.
- I have a much broader skill-set than I had before so I think I will have a number of career options when I finish in college.
- The biggest change for me is that I now see that I'll have opportunities that I didn't have before.
- I have more of a plan now in my life. I know what area I want to work in and I'm looking forward to seeing how things pan out.
- It has provided me with some direction and purpose in my life that was missing before. It has boosted my confidence in that I have almost completed a higher level degree. A sense of achievement. College has hopefully set me up for the rest of my life.
- I think I will have achieved one of my goals i.e. to go to college and graduate. That will give me more options. But as well as that I feel like I have gain a lot of skills like being organised and listening to other people that will be good for a lot of parts of my life.
- I can definitely see I will have more opportunities after college and all the different things I have to do as part of the college course has made me more confident too.
- I definitely feel that going back to college has opened up a lot of new opportunities for me and I'm happy about that.
- Now that I have a better idea of what kind of area I want to work in and hopefully I'll have the qualifications to back it up, I'm more confident that I will have more opportunities.
- Hopefully I'll have more opportunities after I finish in college and being at work fulltime instead of being in college and doing college work every day will give me more time with my family.