WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY

A STUDY OF PERSISTENCE IN FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING IN IRELAND

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the phenomenon of persistence of adult learners in a Further Education and Training (FET) college in Ireland. FET in Ireland is an education provider for adults who for one reason or another wish to return to education. Based on this research, adult learners experience a myriad of personal, structural and institutional factors whilst studying in FET, however this research will argue that adult learners have a remarkable ability to interpret their situation and take action to continue in education, whether their educational journey is linear or not, for the want of a better life. Further, this reserach will argue that both Tinto, (1975) and Bourdieu (1990) focus greatly on the institution as contributors to persistence but underestimate the power of human agency and the power individuals possess to interpret their situations and not merely be shaped by them. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were employed to gain an insight into the phenomena of adult learners and persistence. This research offers a contribution to the existing substantial knowledge base on persistence. Given the existing international research on this topic this piece of research adds a significant dimension, as there is a lack of research on persistence in FET in the Irish context. The findings unveiled that adult learners possess the power to exercise their agency within the constraints and challenges of their everyday lives to succeed in their education for the want of a better life. However they do not have a linear educational journey, therefore this research may provide FET providers in Ireland with the knowledge base to accommodate adult learners who are on a 'irregular of inconsistent' journey.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This research explores the phenomena of persistence of adult learners in a college of further education and training (FET) in Ireland. This chapter indicates the purpose of the study, the research questions, methodology employed, and a brief description of the content of the following chapters. This research strongly resonates with my own personal journey as an adult learner, returning to FET after a long absence from the education system and so my educational journey is described. This chapter will introduce the field of FET in Ireland. This research is set against a backdrop of a changing FET system and the system is highly influenced by wider policy reform in education. According to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2014) reform in FET includes reform at structural level, as well as planning, prioristing, funding, and providing a diverse range of FET courses and services. Further FET reform is "focused on creating the right opportunities for Irish adults". (DES, 2014, p. 18). While creating the right opportunities for adults learners in FET is important, we must not forget that adults who choose to return to FET are generating new opportunities and pursing their goal of the want of a better life.

Rationale for the Study

Adults return to education for a variety of reasons, some may come back to secure future employment, some may come back for personal growth. Whatever the reasons, adults learning journey may not be that straightforward, adult learners often experience various challenges in relation to institutional culture, academic study and their personal lives (Merrill, 2015). Nevertheless, adult leaners can develop resilience, a thirst and a commitment for knowledge, and will persist in learning whether or not a linear educational journey, until they achieve their goals. Persistence of adult learners is a significant human quality, Therefore, it is important to investigate this phenomenon as the will to learn, to engage, to explore and to keep going forward despite constraints is remarkable. Additionally, creating the right opportunities in FET for adult learners is important but fundamentally adults who choose to return to education, there journey may not be that straightforward, therefore provision can be made to be flexible enough to include an 'irregular' or 'inconsistent' journey (Carpenteri, 2007). This can only

happen when we develop a greater understanding of the various challenges adult learners experience whilst studying in FET. Furthermore, within the FET sector in the Irish context, it is a phenomenon that, to my knowledge, has gone largely unremarked in the literature. This research seeks to address this imbalance.

Aims of the Research

The overall aim of this study is to explore the phenomena of persistence of adult learners in a college of FET in Ireland. To explore this phenomenon, I employed qualitative semi-structured interviews and I asked the participants to reflect on various aspects of their past and present experiences of education. Such as;

1. Their early experience of education?
2. The various challenges that may be encountered whilst studying in FET?
3. What keeps them going? What motivates them?
4. What gets in the way?
5. If there was a time they wanted to drop out, what was the deciding factor that kept them in the course?
6. What if anything, could be changed in the college to assist learners in continuing on their course?

Asking participants to reflect on their past and present experience of education is vital to my research, as it was important for me to capture the subjective experience from those who are studying in FET. Adult learners experience a myriad of challenges whilst studying in FET but despite these challenges many persist and achieve their QQI level Award. With this in mind, I pose the question "what are the various challenges adult learners experience whilst studying in FET, and the reasons they persist despite these challenges? A deeper understanding of this question is presented in the findings chapter.

Methodology Approach

To explore this question I adopted a critical realist approach. In my view reality exists outside of the actors description of it. However, it is best interpreted through each individual's experience of it. As Frazer and Lacey (1993) put it, "even if one is a realist at the ontological level, one could be an epistemological interpretivist . . . our knowledge of the real world is inevitably interpretive and provisional rather than

straightforwardly representational" (p. 182). For this reason data was generated by a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews as I felt this flexible approach helped "emphasise the interviewee's feeling, experiences and perceptions" (Schutt, 2009, p. 315) of persistence in FET. Data was analysed through the theoretical lens of structure and agency. This research took place in a large college of FET, under the remit of CDETB. This research has a number of core strengths. Firstly, it explores the phenomena of persistence from the learner's perspective. Secondly, it may provide FET providers in Ireland with the knowledge base to accommodate adult learners whose educational journey is not that straightforward? And it offers a contribution to the existing substantial knowledge base on persistence of adult learners.

My Journey

At this point I feel it is important to acknowledge that my role of researcher is influenced by my values, history, knowledge and experience. My interest in FET, adult learning and persistence is influenced by my experience of returning to FET as an adult learner and through my development and work as an adult educator. My initial experience in education was not a positive experience. I am an early school leaver and left school at the age of fifteen and entered the labour market. I worked throughout my adult life but I always had a feeling of wanting to return to education, not necessarily for employment or up skilling but for my own personal growth. So I returned to FET in 2009 as an adult learner. In light of this research I reflected on what it was that spurred me on in my educational journey. It was sheer determination and to prove to myself that I was capable of achieving an education and overcoming my negative school experience.

Reflecting on this and on my academic career I feel I have developed a reflexive understanding of my world. Persistence and determination has been my key driving force in my personal development and in my work with FET. I experienced many challenges when I returned to adult education, feelings of self-doubt, just being overwhelmed by the whole experience, however through commitment, determination and having a good support network I excelled in my academic career. I call it my academic career because when I returned to education after the feelings of self-doubt lessened somewhat, I immersed myself in the learning as one would with a new career. I pushed myself every week out of my comfort zone to grow as a person and to succeed

in my education. I continued with my education and engaged with territory education. I have experienced may challenges through out my academic career but despite these challenges I had made a choice to return to education for my own personal growth and quitting was no option. Moreover, through my practice I get a sense of persistence within the educational environment as learners draw on the power within to pursue their individual goals. I can also see the personal and professional benefits of returning to adult education. The issue of insider research will be addressed in chapter three, the methodology chapter.

Further Education & Training in Ireland

The definition of 'Further Education and Training' is somewhat problematic. The Department of Education and Skills defines FET as 'education and training which occurs after second level schooling but which is not part of the third level system' (DES, 2012). Echoing this, the Teaching Council, defines Further Education as '... education and training which usually occurs outside of post- primary schooling but which is not part of the third-level system' (Teaching Council 2011, p. 2). Grummell and Murray (2015) argue that further education and training in Ireland is defined by what it is not or by outputs (such as services, training structures and qualifications) rather than in terms of its learners, pedagogy or learning. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) defines further education and training as, 'education and training other than primary or post- primary education or higher education and training'. (Ryan, Murray, & Grummell, 2014). The term FET is used in conjunction with Further Education (FE), Adult Education (AE), Continuing Education (CE) and Community Education (CE) and has been used interchangeably in further education discourse. The terms Further Education and Training (FET) and Adult Education (AE) will be used interchangeably in this study.

According to Hardiman (2012) many FET colleges in Ireland are well established in their local communities and do not carry connotations of elitism that can be associated with other higher institutions or universities. Courses provided in FET are; Post Leaving Certificates (PLC), Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach, Adult Literacy and courses relevant to Adult and Community Education, SOLAS, Teagasc (DES, 2014). Predominantly, all of the aforementioned courses are provided by the recently established Educational Training Boards (ETBs). These courses happen

in dedicated further education college settings, with the exception of community courses, SOLAS centres, and Teagasc. Unlike secondary level, further education is distinct by its very diversity, its multiplicity of learners, subject matter and its close connection with employment. However, this reflects the tensions within the FET sector "between discourses that seek to promote education for economic terms, or other discourses that view FET as a cornerstone of a more just and equal society" (Murray, 2014, p. 106). A review of attitudes by those involved to the purpose and status of FET, which will be explored in chapter two.

Structure of the Thesis

Following on from chapter one, chapter two provides a review of a selection of the literature on persistence of the adult learner. It provides the context for the study, and it conceptualises the phenomena of persistence. To my knowledge there are only a small number of unpublished Masters theses that look at various aspects of FET in Ireland (Hardiman, 2012), but none look at the adult learner and persistence. Therefore I reviewed a selection of the international literature to get a greater understanding of persistence in an educational setting.

Chapter three outlines the methodology employed within this research. It discusses the ontological and epistemological stance of the study. It indicates the research procedure, the process of data generation and analysis and it examines the ethical issues and limitations of this study.

Chapter four presents the findings arising form the data. It presents a brief profile of the adult learner participants. Thereafter, the data is presented thematically with the use of quotations from the interviews with the adult learners.

Chapter five analyses the data through the theoretical lens of structure and agency. It engages the findings with the literature to help illuminate the participant narratives and to get a deeper understanding of persistence in FET in Ireland.

Chapter six provides a concise conclusion to the research and discusses implications for policy, practice, and further research within the field of FET, specifically in relation to persistence and the adult learner.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the field of FET in Ireland. This chapter indicated the purpose of the study, the research questions and the methodology employed. This chapter has presented a passage of my educational journey and gave a brief description of the content of the following chapters. Chapter two will review a selection of the literature on persistence of adult learners. To my knowledge there are only a small number of unpublished Masters theses that look at various aspects of FET in Ireland (Hardiman, 2012), but none look at the adult learner and persistence. Therefore I reviewed a selection of the international literature to get a greater understanding of persistence in an educational setting.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides an in depth literature review on persistence and the adult learner. It is only by studying a selection of the literature that we can expand our knowledge and develop a greater understanding of the various challenges adult learners experience whilst studying in FET. This chapter provides the context for the study, and it conceptualises the phenomena of persistence. To my knowledge there are only a small number of unpublished Masters theses that look at various aspects of FET in Ireland (Hardiman, 2012), but none look at the adult learner and persistence. Therefore I reviewed a selection of the international empirical studies on adult learning and persistence/retention in higher education. (Tinto, 1975; 1988, 1993; Fleming and Finnegan, 2010; Hagedorn, 2012; Merrill, 2015).

Adults return to education for a variety of reasons, some come to up-skill, some for personal development. Studies on adult learning and persistence have suggested that a trajectory of challenges and experiences combine to inform a student's decision to persist or not persist in adult education. (Merrill, 2015; (Tinto, 1975; Mc Givney 2003; Carpentieri, 2007). This research seeks to explore the challenges adult learners experience in FET and the reasons they persist despite these challenges. The first part of this chapter will critically engage with adult education policy in the Irish context. Engaging with the policy context is important in understanding persistence from the learner's perspective and to the findings of this study. The latter part will critically engage with a selection of international empirical studies on persistence of adult learners.

Adult Education Policy in the Irish context.

This research is set against a backdrop of a changing FET system and the system is highly influenced by wider policy reform in education. According to the DES, (2014) reform in FET includes reform at structural level, as well as planning, prioristing, funding, and providing a diverse range of FET courses and services. FET is a relatively new term used in the Irish education system, however this type of provision has a long

history (Ryan, Murray & Grummell, 2014). The origins of the FET sector predate the foundation of the state. Murtagh (2014) identifies two key milestones for Irish further education. The British Government Recess committee built the foundations for FET from 1896-1921, followed by the Irish Free State taking responsibility for FET from 1922 onwards (Murtagh, 2014). During the latter stages, the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) was held responsible for further education. Agricultural education and training was now separated from training in education and general training, the net result was that FET in Ireland became fragmented (Murtagh, 2014). Following the Vocational Education Act in 1930, Vocational Education Committees (VEC's) now know as the Education Training Board (ETB) came into establishment. The primary vision of the VECs was to keep adolescents in school after the age of 14 and "to help them bridge the gap between formal education and technical education (Hyland & Milne, 1992). However, formal education tended to dominate and shape policy and delivery of training within Further Education. This changed with the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education entitled *Learning for Life* (2000), which identified a need for services and premises that would focus purely on the adult learner.

The White Paper *Learning for Life (2000)* signified a key milestone within the sector. This paper was to set out a culture of lifelong learning in Ireland. The ambition of the White Paper was to develop and expand adult education, and focus on access, quality, flexibility and responsiveness, and to establish national and local structures, which help provide a coordinated and integrated approach (DES, 2000, p. 10). The McIver Report was published in 2003; this was based on institutional analysis and examined 15 colleges from those with 150 or more students. This report outlined the range of provision in FET and called for the establishment of a separate FET sector. SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority has published various reports, reviews, planning and strategy documents since it was established in 2013. SOLAS put *The Further Education and Training Strategy* (2014-2019) in place; it is intended to give direction and to guide the transformation of the FET sector in the next five years. The ERSI published a report, *Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present, and Future* (2014). This purpose of this report was to carry out new evidence based research on the FET sector for the purposes of assisting SOLAS in the development of the five-year strategic plan and the associated implememtation plan (McGuinness et al. 2014).

Essentially, this report attempts to map provision across the FET sector in order to develop a sense of some of the main issues facing the FET sector. Within this report there is qualitative evidence on a range of issues, including the role of FET, the quality and relevance of awards, and the qualifications of staff (McGuinness et al. 2014). However there seems to be a deficit of research on the adult learners lived experience and persistence.

The paucity of research on withdrawal/persistence in the FET sector has been observed by a number of scholars (Martinez, 1995; McGivney, 1996). There seem to be three prevalent assumptions underlying the lack of interest in this area in FET:

- Attrition is due to factors beyond the control of the institutes/ colleges and therefore cannot be influenced or addressed (Martinez, 1995).

- Attrition is due to normal processes of over-enrolment, based on the expectation that large numbers will drop out early in their course (McGivney, 1996).

- There is diversity in student motivations and expectations that is beyond the control of the institutions (Kenwright, 1997).

According to Kenwright (1997) these assumptions are now being questioned. Accountability requirements, the need for increased efficiency in resource allocation and the withdrawing of funds in higher level have led to increasing concern about the levels of non-completion (Kenwright, 1997). This can be linked to the manifestation of neo-liberalism, as much of the political direction and the policy decisions made in Ireland have been dominated by the neo-liberal agenda, which commend individual responsibility and a radical retrenchment of the role of the state. Many learners are in FET involuntary due to work activation polices. As, O'Reilly (2014) suggests that,

> In the new world of FET policy, which responds to the needs of a changing economy, education is not a right, but a mechanism that employs liberal values of independence and autonomy that facilitates a flexible and reactive individual who can adapt to a uncertain market driven economy. Rather than individuals participating in FET voluntary, spurred on by their on aspirations, within this new FET process individuals are steered to take up the opportunities that are available to them or risk the loss of unemployment payment (p. 163).

In my view, this contradicts the whole idea of adult education as being collaborative, cooperative and voluntary.

Although progress has been made in recent years to provide a sounder infrastructure around data in FET. Data collection in FET is still weak (Sweeney, 2013). Echoing this, the ERSI's study on the Irish FET sector states "the current data collection within the FET system is wholly inadequate for the purpose of measurement of key indicators such as course completion rates, accreditation levels and progression patterns" (McGuinness, et al. 2014, p. 2). In contrast to this, Connolly (2007, p. 119) argues that the limited amount of existing research that does exist in FET seeks to examine 'what works, rather than any critique or questionings of assumptions or approaches'. In other words, funded research activity is geared toward maintaining the status quo rather than challenging the dominant discourse.

Moreover, in recent years there have been significant changes within adult education provision. Government reform has resulted in the development of SOLAS, and sixteen education and training boards (ETBs). The mission of SOLAS is to give people opportunities to transform their lives through FET. To provide businesses with talented people, who have the right skills, and to anticipate and respond innovatively to national and international changes, including in labour markets (DES, 2012, p. 5). Further, FET in Ireland aims to deliver a high quality learning experience leading to better outcomes for all those who engage in it. It aims to support economic development, social inclusion, and meet the needs of all leaners, communities and employers who engage with FET (DES, 2014, p. 4).

McGuinness et al, (2014) offers a comprehensive review of attitudes by those involved to the purpose and status of FET. There are divisions between those who view FET as primarily about labour market access, those who feel that the social inclusion role of FET is being downgraded, and those who see labour market and social inclusion education as complementary. Reflecting on adult and further education policy in the Irish context, in my view, there has been a significant shift from adult education policies directed at lifelong learning towards labour market activation. This shift can have a significant effect on the learning experiences of learners as the narrative on personal development is minimal, and education as a right that "allows learners to become more

fully human, to become conscious of their world"…contributes to personal discovery, increased confidence, increased agency and a capacity to shape's one's world and community" (O'Reilly, 2014, p. 163) is underplayed.

Notwithstanding, FET is of significant value in growth of the individual and society, in addition to cultural development. Education locates us in the world allowing us to share our values and understanding with others, while contributing to the quality of life. According to the FET strategy excellent teaching and learning experiences and resources should be available to FET students. The FET sector must provide clear paths to employment and further education progression and better progression pathways from FET to HE. Irish policy around FET progression place less emphasis on persistence of adult learners thus policy is less informed by what influences learners to complete their course of study.

Persistence

Persistence in adult education is a contested concept. According to Hagedorn (2012) the most basic and non-controversial definition is of persister and non-persister. A persister is defined as a learner who registers in a programme and remains in that programme until completion. A non-persister is a learner who leaves a programme without earning a certificate and never returns to that programme. Although these definitions are easy to understand, learners' experiences of persistence are rarely this straightforward (Hagedorn, 2012). As learners may;

- Register in a programme but not complete any credits. Learner returns to college the next year and remains until credits are achieved.
- Register in a programme, continues in that programme for a period of time, and stops out but returns to education at a later stage of the lifecourse.
- Register in a programme, remains in that programme for one year then transfers to another college to finish that programme.
- Registers in a full time course (QQI, Major Award) and drops all modules but one (QQI, Minor Award).

These examples show variability in learner's registration patterns and external responsibilities that make it difficult to define one learner as a persister and another a

non-persister. This is supported by Crowther, Mc Laclachlan, and Tett (2010) who suggest, "persistence is a contested concept which does not necessarily equate to completing a programme" (p. 2).

Further, terms such as, dropping out, retention, attrition, withdrawal, completion, non-completion and are all terms that are used in the literature. The terms persistence and retention are often used interchangeable. However a number of studies propose that retention reflects the perspectives of the institutional providers, whereas, persistence reflects the perspective of the learners. (Carpentieri, 2007; Crowther et al. 2010; Hagedorn, 2012). The upmost factor here is the difference in understanding of persistence as between the provider, and the learner.

 A study by Carpentieri (2007, p. 20) suggests that

> Whereas retention is a provider-centered concept, persistence puts the learner at the centre of the equation - turning retention inside out...Whereas a provider-centered focus might see a non-continuing learner as dropping out, a learner-centered focus acknowledges that learners may be 'dipping out' for a while, generally because of other responsibilities...Inconsistent does not necessarily mean non-persistent. So, while from a provider's standpoint a learner may appear to be irregularly engaged in learning, from a learner's perspective periods of formal provision, sandwiched by breaks of self-directed study or just meeting the demands of life may be natural and rational elements in a lifelong learning journey. Further, provision to encourage persistence and progression needs to be flexible enough to include an 'irregular' or 'inconsistent' journey.

This study puts the learner at the centre of the equation, as the direct involvement of the learners helped shaped this study and the learner's perspective on persistence is significant to the development of any forthcoming FET policies and practices. I suggest that discourse on persistence needs to be highlighted in the field of FET, as Carpentieri (2007) argues many learners do not have a linear educational journey, and provision can be made to be flexible enough to include an 'irregular' or 'inconsistent' journey. This can only happen when we develop a greater understanding of the various challenges adult learners experience whilst studying in FET.

Factors Affecting Adult Persistence

As mentioned above, the paucity of research on withdrawal/persistence in the FET sector has been observed by a number of scholars (Martinez, 1995; McGivney, 1996). There are, however a number of international empirical studies on adult learning and persistence/retention in higher education. (Tinto, 1975; 1988, 1993; Fleming and

Finnegan, 2010; Hagedorn, 2012; Merrill, 2015). With this in mind, I will review a selection of the literature on adult learning and persistence in higher education. Firstly, I feel it is important to specify that there are significant differences in FET provision in Ireland to Higher Education (HE) provision in Ireland, including differences in structures, and the retraining of staff. However, they may have similarities of dealing with the same macro-political and ideological influences (Hardiman, 2012). In addition, FET students may differ from higher-level students; higher-level students are referred to as 'traditional students'. The report 'Access and Retention: the experience of non-traditional learners in Higher Education' 2008-2010 (RANLHE) defines 'non-traditional' as students who are under-represented in HE and whose participation is constrained by structural factors: including students from low income families, first generation entrants, students from minority ethnic groups, students with disabilities and mature students. The 'traditional student' implies a homogeneity that does not take account of the complexity of individual histories and dispositions. Nonetheless, the typically non-traditional adult learners in FET and HE may have similar experiences, (Hardiman, 2012) which I feel may help illuminate the phenomenon of persistence in the FET sector.

Previous studies on adult learning and persistence have suggested that a trajectory of challenges and experiences combine to inform a student's decision to persist or not persist in adult education (Merrill, 2015; Tinto, 1975; McGivney 2004; Carpentieri, 2007). Adult learners come to FET with a variety of educational needs and backgrounds. Some return to FET after a gap of several years, and may require social support, and more. Reviewing a selection of the literature on adult learning and persistence a number of factors emerged. Factors that align with my study include, personal, structural and institutional factors.

Institutional

Tinto's (1975; 1988; 1993) work has been significant in establishing the role of the institutions in promoting the appropriate milieu for student persistence and integration. Tinto's integration model suggests that persistence is related to the learners' ability and actions to become an involved member in her institution. This model suggests the need for a match between the institutional milieu and the learners' commitment. A good match leads to higher student integration into the academic and social domains of

college life and thus, increasing the probability of persistence. Arguably, learners are likely to withdraw or transfer to another college if the match between the learner and institution is poor (Hagedorn, 2012).

Tinto's (1993) model of integration views the institution as a social system with its own values and social structures. He argues that integration is the result of two factors, the degree of congruence that develops between the learner and the value patterns of the college collectively, and the satisfactory interaction with other students and staff members in the college. Supporting this is a finding from a European study by Fleming and Finnegan (2010), this study suggests that one of the main concerns of non-traditional students in HE is: "Who is my friend? Who am I now in this environment? And who is going to be my ally in the new learning and developmental trajectory? Tinto (1993) identified "five factors that influence persistence/ retention, feedback, support, involvement, expectations and learning – and simply asserts, "students who learn are students who stay" (Merrill 2015, p. 1860). However, Tinto's approach negates the student's socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Adult learners often experience personal and structural problems such as financial or health problems, so even if the learners are 'there to learn' if the problems escalate they may have to leave, albeit not out of choice (Merrill, 2015). Fleming and Finnegan, (2010) argued that non-traditional students benefited greatly from the firm collaborations, friendships and networks of support they formed as they persisted in college and universities.

Although Tinto's model has been highly influential in the educational research field, Merrill (2015) suggests it highlights institutional integration and fails to discuss factors external to the college that affect the student. The impact of personal and structural factors can have a significant effect on a learner's decision to persist or withdraw. In fact, Tinto's model assumes that students have to fit in and adapt to the institutions culture rather than the college adjusting to the diverse needs of a student population.

Personal / Structural Factors

According to Alhassan (2012) for adult learners the traditional social environment of the college is not nearly as important, what is important to the adult learner are external issues. Outside concerns such as personal issues, finance, employment opportunities, family support, and the juggling of roles and other commitments (Bean & Metnzer,

1985; Hardiman, 2012). Hinton-Smith (2008) supports this argument, as she proposes that adult learners try to manage their multiple roles and did not know whether they would manage to integrate academic life with their various commitments. In addition to personal, juggling of roles, family support and financial difficulties, health status is cited as a contributing factor to non-completion (Harmon & Foubert, 2010).

In reviewing a selection of the literature on persistence in adult education further attention needs to be paid to the mental health of adult learners (Fleming & Finnegan, 2010). Adult learners may perceive the new environment as a threat due to feelings of uncertainty of how to cope appropriately. In a study of the health of Irish students, for two thirds of students the main source of stress was from the demands of college studies which were higher among females than males (Hope & Dring, 2005). Christie, Munro and Fisher (2004) note that what may be bearable for one student may not be bearable for another. Students coping skills are critical to overall well-being and academic performance. Stress may be defined as a change that causes psychological, emotional or physical strain. Initial symptoms may appear as headaches or colds but can develop into more serious problems. A high rate of students displayed symptoms of chronic stress, which may negatively impact overall quality of life and learning ability. Feedback from Irish students linked this stress with the burden of workload and financial difficulties (Harmon et al. 2010). Health problems may affect adult learning and persistence on a large scale in the FET sector.

The impact on workload on studies is noted (Harmon et al. 2010). Workload is defined as time spent on study and part-time employment, reflecting diversity of student roles. Research indicates that part-time employment of more than twenty hours per week can impact academic achievement negatively while excessive employment hours worked can be detrimental to studies. Excessive employment and study hours can adversely affect student's quality of life, and increase inequality for those already in disadvantaged positions (Darmody & Smith, 2008).

Further, commitment to educational goals and commitment to a particular institution that enables learners to achieve their goals result from both personal characteristics of the learner and the level of social and academic integration in an institution. Goals and institutional commitment are constantly being adapted in the interaction process in ways

that lead to persistence or to various forms of withdrawal (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000). This is supported by Bergman, Gross, Berry & Shuck, (2014) as they state that being an adult learner is fraught with time and resource issues, they claim that adult learners need more time to dedicate to their academic life, and it can be challenging for adult learners to strike a balance to reach their academic goal which can often lead to departure decisions.

Studies have shown that positive tutor and student interactions and taking advantage of resources that promote academic success such as academic advising, learning centers, tutorials and office hours have been demonstrated to positively influence retention by academically and socially integrating students into the university community (Demetriou, & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Martinez & Munday, 1998). Allen (2012) suggests that strategies for promoting persistence in an adult educational setting, are utilising flexible approaches, differentiated learning styles, monitoring absenteeism and collecting student feedback.

According to Merrill (2015) Tinto's model highlights institutional integration and fails to discuss factors external to the college that affect the student. Tinto's (1975, 1988, 1993) work has been important in establishing the role of the institution in promoting a milieu for student persistence and integration. However, it must be emphasised that the integration of young full time students is central to Tinto's theory. This is not the case in FET in Ireland where part-time and mature age students have been a large proportion of the FET student population. Tinto's model is an explanatory model of persistence, which is rooted in the notion of person-environment fit. This model suggests that student carries with them certain qualities and background characteristics (academic, socio economic level) when they register into a particular college. It is these entry characteristics that lead to the initial commitment to the institution. Further, background characteristics jointly influence integration into an institution. If the student does not adapt to the institution, Tinto argues this will affect persistence.

As mentioned above, Merrill (2015) argues that Tinto's approach fails to consider the learners' socio-economic and cultural background. The impact of external, personal, and structural factors can have a significant effect on a learner's decision to persist or withdraw. In fact, Tinto's model assumes that students have to fit-in and adept to the

institutions culture rather than the college adjusting to the diverse needs of a student population.

Institutional Habitus

Essentially the assumptions of Tinto's theoretical model suggest that the institution promotes a milieu for persistence and integration and it is up to the individual student to integrate into college life. Tinto's approach blames the student for failure, rather than looking at the internal structures of the institution. On the other hand Merrill (2015) and Reay's (2010) approach draws on the work of Bourdieu. This approach focuses on the institution and its 'institutional habitus' rather than focusing on the individual student. In contrast to Tinto's assumptions of the student being a failure. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that education institution's can favour knowledge and experience of the dominant social groups to the detriment of others. Hence, a student from the dominant social class who, in Bourdieu's words encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 127). Conversely, Reay et al. (2009) refers to the idea of non-traditional entrants being like 'fish out of water' and therefore return to their familiar habitus. Essentially, educational institutions should embrace diversity of the student population. Further, if institutional habitus is inclusive and accepting of difference, and does not prioritize one set of characteristics, but rather celebrates and prizes diversity and difference. Students from diverse backgrounds will find greater acceptance of and respect for their own practices and knowledge and this in turn will promote higher levels of persistence in adult education (Thomas, 2002)

Conclusion

For many adult learners returning to education can have a transformative effect on their life, for others not so much. However, as a researcher and a practitioner it is paramount that we help learners reach their goal, whether that is a consistent, or inconsistent journey. Through examination on the empirical studies of persistence in adult education it is evident that there is no single factor that can satisfactorily explain participation or non-participation' (McGivney, 1993, p. 11). The literature suggests that a matrix of factors, and a trajectory of challenges and institutional, internal, and external

experiences influence a student's decision to persist or not persist in adult education. Chapter three will outline the methodology employed within this research

CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter two presented a review of a selection of the literature on persistence of the adult learner. It provided the context for the study, and it conceptualised the phenomena of persistence. It reviewed a selection of the international literature to get a greater understanding of persistence in an educational setting. This chapter will outline the methodology employed within this research. It will discuss my ontological and epistemological position and the reflexive methodology adopted to gather the necessary data to seek "what are the various challenges adult learners experience whilst studying in FET, and the reasons they persist despite these challenge*s?* This chapter indicates the research procedure, a reflection on the process of data generation and analysis. A reflection on my personal positionality within the site where the research took place is presented, and it examines the ethical issues and limitations of this research.

The overall aim of this research is to explore the challenges adult learners experience whilst studying in FET, and the reasons they persist despite these challenges. As this research is investigating the experiences of adult learners a reflexive methodology has been adopted as the decision to solely focus on methods can negate

> "The way the different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development, during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 9).

In concurrence with this statement it is said that; "It is not methods but ontology and epistemology which are determinants of good social science" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 8). To my mind, it is the 'why' that is paramount to good social science, the potential of social change supersedes the how we conduct social science.

Ontological/ Epistemological Position

O' Leary (2010) suggests that questions of ontology are concerned with "what types of things actually exist? While the key question addressed by epistemology is what are the rules for discovering what exists?" (p. 5). According to Bryman (2004) "Objectivism is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena and their meanings have an

existence that is independent of social actors" (p. 16). Constructionism on the other hand implies that social phenomena and their meanings are socially constructed (Bryman, 2004). However, Elder-Vass (2012) argues for a synthesis of realism and constructionism, he examines the ontology of culture, knowledge and language and explores how they can contribute to constructing our social reality, and hence this provides a basis for a synthesis of realism and constructionism.

Alvesson & Skoldberg (2009) suggest that positivism, post-positivism and critical realism are all philosophical positions with epistemological concerns. Positivism advocates for the application of the natural sciences, as "traditionally it was thought that there was a single correct set of procedures for investigating phenomena and presenting findings, based on a scientific model of research" (Walsh & Ryan, 2015). Positivist research is largely about the search of proof, and is commonly linked to quantitative research. Positivism is not about the lived experience; and for some, social research should be modelled on research in the natural sciences (Walsh & Ryan, 2015). Post-positivism rejects positivism and argues that natural law cannot be applied to the social world as researchers bring their own ontological and epistemological assumptions into research. This is why the concept of reflexivity is considered important when generating research as post positivists recognise that there are many competing discourses, which give rise to contradictions, but having a reflexive attitude the researcher will stick with the contradictions and tensions that arise, and will look critically at what is assumed in in any approach that assumes that we can 'empower' somebody else (Walsh & Ryan, 2015).

Critical realism is intended to provide a philosophical grounding for science as well as an alternative to positivism/ post-positivists approach. Critical realism stresses the importance of scientific activity, however they are not to be confused with positivism, and its interests in possible patterns. Instead critical realism seeks to identify the deeper lying mechanisms, which are taken to generate empirical phenomena (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 40). From a critical realist perspective reality is understood as a layered system of objects with casual power (Sayer, 2000). Reality consists of three layers, the real, the actual and the empirical. The real are the underlying mechanisms that cannot be observed, the actual are the events that are caused by the mechanisms in the real, and the empirical is what we can observe or sense as human beings. The real

represents the underlying mechanism that cannot be seen, we know about these mechanisms, we talk about them, but we do not see them. According to Foster (2013) an example of the real could be 'human will'. We talk about human will, but we cannot see it, it is discussed and there are many different views on it but we cannot see it. The actual are the events, which are caused by the mechanisms in the real, for example achieving an education can be caused by human will, and the empirical realm includes what we can observe or sense as human beings such as the position of the researcher observing the events in this realm and then speculating about the real. Danermark, B., Ekstrom, M., Jakobsen, L. & karisson, J. C. (2002) argue that the task of science is to investigate the realm of the real and how it relates to the other two realms as they suggest,

> Scientific work is to investigate and identify relationships and non-relationships, respectively, between what we experience, what actually happens, and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events in the world. (p. 21).

Reflecting on this study adult learners return to education after a long absence from the education system. Many return to education for various reasons, some for personal development, and some to secure employment. However, when adults return to education their education trajectory may not be that straight forward, based on this study adult learners who return to education face a myriad of personal, structural and institutional challenges but despite these challenges adults can draw on their human will and persist and be successful in their educational journey. To my mind, this reflects the underlying mechanisms in the realm of the real (human will) causing the event in the realm of the actual (persistence and success in education) and it is being sensed or observed by human beings (the researcher). From my perspective this shines a light on " both necessity and possibility or potential in the world (Sayer, 2000, p. 11). As from a critical realist perspective the human being has a "remarkable sensitivity to their context, which derives particularly from their ability to interpret situations rather than purely been passively shaped by them (Sayer, 2000, p. 13). In other words actors can use their agency to pursue an education despite constraints of everyday life. This I feel demonstrates how the three realms of reality relate to each other and how critical realisms thinking has an emancipatory potential as the nature of real object (structures, observable or unobservable) at any given time can help or hinder what can happen but

does not pre-determine what will happen, but will nurture the possibility of hope (Sayer, 2000).

According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009,) critical realism shares ground with positivism, such as patterns, finding casualties and generalizations, but it also differs from this tradition, as it argues that the study of the observable is too superficial, as it disregards the unobservable mechanisms that produce the phenomena positivists want to measure and explain. For example we may be able to observe things such the structure of an organisation, as well as what happens when they act, however some structures may be unobservable, and there is the possibility that powers exist unexercised, and hence what has happened or known to have happened does not exhaust what could happen. Realist ontology therefore makes it possible to understand how we may become something that we are not; for example, a successful student. Moreover, critical realists do not accept a distinction between theory and observation, instead they are interested in the complex networks of theoretical and observable elements characterising efforts going beneath the surface of social phenomena (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 40).

With this in mind, from my perspective, reality exists outside of the social actor, however it is best interpreted through each individuals lived experience. In identifying the structures that generate the mechanisms that control the structures it is vital to consider the phenomena of agency within the realm of reality. In my view the concept of agency is very important as the social actor can become aware of the social structures and construct new structures in desires to pursue their goals, but it is also good to recall that social actors " have not constructed the categories they put to work in this work of construction" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 10). Nevertheless, structure and agency should not be seen as opposites, such as the individual and society, the primacy of relations is fundamental for a reflexive sociology. To be reflexive in our worlds is to understand and be aware of the relations within structures whether cognitive, institutional, or structures that are not apparent in the observant patterns of event, we need to understand these structures in order to create social change (Bryman, 2004, p. 12).

Qualitative Research

Overall my research is driven by elements of a critical realist approach. In my view reality exists outside of the actor's description of it. However, it is best interpreted through each individual's lived experience. As Frazer and Lacey (1993) put it, "even if one is a realist at the ontological level, one could be an epistemological interpretivist . . . our knowledge of the real world is inevitably interpretive and provisional rather than straightforwardly representational" (p. 182). Hence critical realists retain an ontological realism (there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and constructions) while accepting a form of epistemological constructivism (our *understanding* of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint. The reflects back to Elder-Vass (2012) argument for a synthesis of realism and constructionism, he examines the ontology of culture, knowledge and language and explores how they can contribute to constructing our social reality, and hence this provides a basis for a synthesis of realism and constructionism. The different forms of realism referenced here agree that there is no possibility of attaining a single, "correct" understanding of the world. For this reason data was generated by a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews as I feel this flexible approach helped "emphasise the interviewee's feeling, experiences and perceptions" (Schutt, 2009, p. 315) of persistence in FET. This qualitative approach allowed me the researcher to get a richer view of persistence in FET from the adult learners perspective by "delving in to social complexities in order to truly explore and understand the interactions, processes, lived experience, and beliefs system that are part of individuals, institutions, cultural groups, and even the everyday life" (O' Leary, 2012, p. 113-114).

Semi-Structured Interviews

To conduct the research a single-method approach was taken using qualitative semi-structured interviews. O'Leary (2011) defined qualitative semi-structured interview as:

> The use of a flexible structure, interviewers can start with a defined questioning plan, but will shift in order to follow the natural flow of conversation. Interviewers may also deviate from the plan in order to pursue interesting plans (p, 195).

This method was suitable for my study, as the freedom to allow the respondent's to talk freely about what is significant to them is important. However having an interview schedule ensured all topics that were considered crucial to the study were covered (Bell

1999; O'Leary 2010). I devised a set of questions so I could compare and contrast the participant's experiences, challenges, and reasons of persistence in FET. The semi-structured interviews were flexible with open-ended style questions to allow for the natural flow of conversation, which I feel helped the participants as they reflected on the social context in which they found themselves, their relation to it, and how they interpreted persistence in FET.

Sampling

In relation to the semi-structured interviews I employed a non- probability purposive method of sampling. According to Schutt (2009) non-probability sampling are often used in qualitative research with a focus on one setting or a very small sample. In Purposive sampling each sample element is selected for a reason. Non-probability purposive sampling was suitable for this study as the research was taking place in a college of further education and the sample became a very small sample of six adult learners. Further, the participants were "knowledgeable about the cultural arena or situation or experience being studied" (Schutt, 2009, p. 173). O'Leary (2011) notes purposive sampling "involves the selection of a sample with a particular focus in mind. Echoing Clark's (2010) argument that researchers make "pragmatic decisions in the field to recruit participants"(p, 315). Denscombe (2003, p. 15) argues this method is used when a researcher has some knowledge already on the topic and the sample, and will choose a sample they feel will generate the best data. Adult learners who returned to FET after been absent from education for several years were the participants in this research. Further, adult learners who are studying in my place of work participated in this research.

Research Setting

The ideal research setting is one that the researcher acquires easy access, creates rapport with participants and generates data related to the research interests (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). I chose to carry out this research in a large college of further education under the remit of CDETB. As mentioned the college were the research took place is my place of work. I work as a part-time teacher and have been employed there for one year. Before the research took place I sought permission from the college principal and undertook not to disclose the identity of the learners or the college. With permission granted the next step was the recruitment process. At first I thought I would advertise through the

medium of a poster but on reflection I felt that a personal invitation might be more successful. Therefore, I produced a letter of invitation for potential participants. I approached the teachers in the staffroom and asked if I could take five or ten minutes out of their class time to present my research to the adult learners. All the teachers were very accommodating. I went into each individual class and presented my research interests to the learners. I then handed out the letter of invitation to each student in each classroom. From the outset, learners showed interest in participating in the study. On the letter of invitation I had my contact details, and I asked the learners if they were interested in taking part in a research project on persistence in FET, they could contact me on the details provided. Six adult learners contacted me and I made arrangements to meet them prior to the interviews to discuss the research in more detail. We met in an allocated room in the college. As the participants are studying in my place of employment I feel this warrants a discussion on positionality, as it relates to the research methodology.

Insider Research

Rooney (2005) defined insider research as being "where the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting." (p. 6). Naples (2003) defines insider research as "the study of one's own social group or society" (p. 46). As this research is exploring the various challenges adult learners experience whilst studying in FET, and the reasons they persist despite these challenges? And as my interest in researching this phenomenon comes from my own experience of returning to adult education, this I feel defines me as an insider researcher. I have much in common with my participants and I am a member of the same social group on a number of levels. As mentioned above, I returned to adult education in 2009 after being absent from the education system for many years. I did not complete my initial education so I am in the category of an early-school leaver. Further, I come from a working class background, being a member of these two social groups reflects the experience of my participants. Further, the organisation where the research was conducted is my place of employment, which for me was advantageous, as I had the advantage of easy access and I did not have to familiarize myself with a different college environment and negotiate new encounters. However, I am aware of the ethical implications such as student teacher relationship whilst working within an educational environment. It was paramount that I adhered to my professional boundaries and a duty of care to my students, therefore I

recruited participants who I had no involvement with, I may have seen the participants in the vicinity of the college, but not knowing them prior to the interview meant that we had no preconceptions, 'baggage' or expectations based on familiarity (Hockey, 1993, p. 206). However, the practice of reflexivity, means recognizing an appropriate degree of social and emotional distance, and while this is a complex process, it does come with its benefits, challenges, and opportunities.

Generating Data

With this in mind, at the beginning of each interview, I explained fully to the respondents the purpose of the study and an agreement on the use of a recordable device and was met. The interviews lasted forty-five minutes, I had an interview schedule, rather than a set of predetermined questions, this way I was free to pursue lines of thinking introduced by the participants. The data gathered was quite informative and respondents were very clear in their response to the interview questions. Reflecting on the literature, and my research question generated the interview questions. Reflecting on the interview process, I feel my first interview, was satisfactory as I was aware I might be talking too much, I was slightly nervous. Listening back to the recording of the interview, my voice did feature somewhat however, I learned from this, as when conducting the remainder of the interviews I was aware that the primary voices to be heard in the interviews are that of the participants. Nevertheless, I feel the participants were all happy to take part in the research and I felt it gave them a platform to explore their experiences of FET. Further, for me, participating in the interviews has not only helped me improve my interview techniques but also has given me a greater insight into persistence in FET and has given me great confidence on this learning journey.

Data Analysis

Having finally completed the interview process, the next task was the transcription process. Denscombe (2003) argues "the process of transcribing needs to be recognised as a substantial part of the method of interviewing" as it can bring the researcher "close to the data" (p. 183). According to Denscombe (2003) there are a number of computer software packages that have been developed specifically for analysis of qualitative data. I used a site called WREALLY.com to transcribe the interviews, as I felt the tools they provide were very straightforward and user friendly. I employed the use of MAXQDA a computer aid for organising my findings into themes. With the help of MAXQDA, I

categorised chunks of data in terms of there content. This is referred to as open coding then I looked for relationships between the codes and links and associations that allowed certain codes to be included under broader headings, and certain codes to be seen as more important than others. This is referred to as axial coding (Denscombe, 2003) connecting them and placing them in themes, and then into two main themes which both include sub-themes. The two main themes are challenges while in FET and reasons to persist. Through the process of collecting and analysing the data, I listened to the recordings of the interviews repeatedly, as I wanted to become particularly familiar with the transcripts in hope that my interpretation of the data will do the research justice.

Ethics

General ethical guidelines were adhered to at all times during the research process. Confidentiality, respect and ensuring no harm to the participants prioritized the research at all times. I ensured the participants gave informed consent, as I wanted them to fully understand their role in the interview process, and to give them the opportunity to read through the ethical considerations. I assured them that I would send them a copy of the transcript and the finished piece upon its completion, and if they wished to change or omit any information provided they could do so. I was very aware to respect the rights of the interviewees and to suspend any personal values and adopt a non-judgemental view in relation to the information being discussed in the interviews. All the data collected was treated with the utmost confidence and a coded system was used to keep notes. All participants were made aware that their name would not be disclosed, that their involvement was on a voluntary basis, and they could withdraw from the research process at any time (Schutt, 2009, p. 75; Bell, 1995). Finally, I was very aware of the power relations in the interview process as I am a member of staff in the college however I ensured the well being of the participants through out the research at all times. The interviews took place in an allocated room in the college although I did offer the participants alternative spaces outside of the college, but they were happy for the interviews to take place on campus.

Methodological Limitations

With all research there may be some limitations to this study. The benefits to using a qualitative approach for this study are a detailed perspective from the participants in

relation to persistence in FET. Whilst this research cannot be generalised to the whole cohort of Irish adult learners in FET, it has brought about some much needed insight into an otherwise under researched area. Further, findings may have a bearing on future practice within FET and/or maybe useful for wider discussion. Therefore, this research is considered to be reliable as O'Leary (2010) argues, " Reliability is concerned with internal consistency, i.e. whether data/results collected, measured or generated are the same under repeated trials" (p. 43). In addition, according to O'Leary (2010) "validity is concerned with truth value, also considers whether methods, approaches, and techniques actually relate to what is being explored" (p. 43). This research is considered to be valid as I was professional and systematic in the approach, sampling and analysis of data. Finally, further research could be conducted on this topic on a larger scale to produce more generalizable findings

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the methodological approach adopted for this research. This research is driven by elements of a critical realist approach. I employed semi structured qualitative interviews to explore this phenomenon. As mentioned there is a wide range of research on persistence, however there is a paucity of research on persistence in the Irish context. This research is an attempt to get a greater understanding of the lived experience of adult learner and persistence in FET in Ireland. The following chapter will present the findings of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS CHAPTER

Introduction

The foregoing chapters have focused on the existing literature and the rationale for this study in terms of context and my positionality. This chapter will present the findings arising form the data. Based on this study the findings suggest that adult learners may experience various challenges such as institutional, structural, and personal challenges, which can make it difficult for some to persist and complete their course of study. However, when adult learners make that first step, and engage in their studies they can draw on the power within themselves and take an active stance to keep on going. This study asked "what are the challenges adult learners experience whilst in FET, and the reasons they persist despite these challenges?" Based on this study there a number of reasons that are intertwined in relation to the adult learner and persistence. These are institutional, the possibility of new opportunities [in the words of the participants] to "*better myself*" and primarily the personal qualities and dispositions of the participant's, their will to learn to achieve their goal of what they hope will be a better life. This chapter will present the findings arising form the research. It presents a brief profile of the research site and of the adult learner participants. Thereafter, the data is presented thematically with the use of quotations from the interviews with the adult learners. This chapter will discuss the findings under themes such as challenges experienced whilst in FET and reasons to persist.

This research took place in a large college of further education and training under the remit of the CDETB. The college is well established and well recognised in the community. Experienced staff are available to support the educational mission of the college but also to provide support and guidance to all learners. Services provided are academic advisory and a guidance counseling service. A brief acknowledgment of the six adult learners who kindly gave their time and generously shared their stories will be now presented. I will introduce each participant giving a brief outline of their backgrounds and their educational life experiences. The order in which the participants are presented is in which they were first interviewed. I have changed the names of the participants to protect their identity.

Profile of the participants

1. Annemarie

Annemarie is a single Mom with a diverse and interesting educational trajectory. Annemarie was born in Dublin and enjoyed school from an early age. She completed her Leaving Certificate with all honour subjects and then entered university. In her first year of university Annemarie gave birth to her second child. Annemarie did not like the idea of leaving the children in crèche so she decided to take a break from education and wait to return when the children started their educational trajectory. Some years later, Annemarie returned to FET to pursue her academic career in the hope of one day getting the qualifications she requires to attain some quality employment to make some changes in her life.

2. Lisa

Lisa has three children with her longtime partner. Lisa did not do great in school in fact she did not like school. Lisa left school when she was 16 with no qualifications. She always wanted to achieve an education and she said, "someday I will". From school Lisa took up employment and had various jobs throughout her adult life. The last ten years Lisa has worked with an organization that cares for senior citizens. Lisa loved her job but there was no place for promotion so she decided to return to FET in the pursuit to fulfill her dream of getting an education and to attain the qualifications to get a good job were there would be space for promotion.

3. Harry

Harry too has had an interesting educational trajectory; he is an early school leaver. Harry had various retail jobs and then decided to return to FET. Harry achieved the Leaving Certificate and from there he entered Trinity College on the Trinity Access Programme. To his surprise he passed the Trinity Access Programme and was offered a degree programme in Trinity. Harry experienced a bereavement and health issues and did not complete the degree programme. In later years Harry returned to FET for a third time because he felt he could achieve more academically and to get a qualification to develop a challenging and rewarding career.

4. Noel

Noel found school difficult and left without any qualifications. Noel worked throughout

his adult life until the day he became ill; this changed Noel's employment opportunities and found himself redundant. Noel decided to apply for a FET course. He returned to FET for his own personal growth.

5. Patrick

Patrick left school when he was 16. He went straight into employment. Patrick always wanted to have an education and decided to do the leaving Certificate while working. He returned to FET for the first time in 2011, he passed the Leaving Certificate and secured employment but due to factors beyond his control Patrick found himself out of the work force and idle. This gave him the bite to return to FET. Patrick is doing a Level 5 and is hoping to continue on to a level 6, then to a degree program. Patrick wants to develop a challenging and rewarding career which will 'give him a better life" (Patrick, 2016).

6. Geraldine

Geraldine experienced difficulties growing up. She has one child and is his primary carer. Geraldine left school before completing the Junior Certificate. She always knew even back in her twenties that she wanted an education. Over the years she has being in and out of education. She feels that the time has to be right and to make sure it is right for you. Geraldine could not secure any fulltime employment and she puts this down to having only the basics when it comes to reading and writing. She stated "you need to be able to read, write and spell properly to be able to make something of your life".

Thematic Anaylsis

The aforementioned participants all shared their experiences of FET, threads emerged through their narratives which I have catergorised into main themes and sub-themes which help to highlight the challenges they experience whilst studying in FET and the reasons they persist despite these challenges. Two main themes and eleven sub-themes were identifed. The themes were derived from the transcripts and the narraitives of the participants throughout their interviews. The themes identify the commonalities and differences in relation to the participant's collective experience. Although the themes are data driven they are connected to the literature and they will be reflected back to the research question in the discussion chapter. The main themes are, the challenges experienced whilst in FET and the reasons they persist despite these challenges. The

themes and sub-themes will be presented and supported by quotations from the participants transcripts.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Challenges experienced whilst in FET?	• Nervousness • Health • Financial • Juggling roles • Sense of belonging • Workload • The classroom environment
Reasons to persist?	• Support • Better myself • Will to learn • Resilience

Challenges experienced whilst in FET?

- *Nervousness*
- *Health*
- *Financial*
- *Juggling roles*
- *Sense of belonging*
- *Workload*
- *The classroom environment*

Nervousness

For many adult learners returning to education is a major challenge and is often accompanied with feelings of apprehension, anxiety, and feelings of not belonging back in the educational environment. Five out of the six participants had a negative experience of formal education, four out of the six participants had previous experience in FET, and two of the participants had entered third level but did not complete the programmes. All participants mentioned personal reasons such as confidence, self-doubt, and health reasons, which were acute at the beginning of the programme however levels of anxiety decreased and for some diminished through out the year.

> *I was a nervous wreck. I didn't even know if I was going to walk in that door the first morning and I was thinking right what's people going to be like in the class. I was really thinking all sorts. I actually nearly didn't walk in to be honest with you and I worry then would they be all young and well educated, you know, would I be lost in it.* **(Lisa)**

For Lisa walking into the college on the first morning was a major challenge, for Patrick the challenge was to return to the college after the first day, as he said,

> *I had a few people around me who were good to me at the time, and I was saying to them, I'm not going back, I'm not going back. They were saying no go back, you will do great. So I did go back and then after a few days, I was thinking to myself what with was I panicking about.* **(Patrick)**

While Patrick's reflects on his moments of panic, Annemarie and Harry reflect on the challenges of having to deal with their nerves on entering back into an educational setting and

into studying mode.

> *I was very nervous cause it was 6 years since I'd been in education. But the nerves did fade. All the tutors were very reassuring, but I still get a bit nervous. Not even nervous but a bit overwhelmed.* **(Annemarie)**

> *When I came back I was nervous because the whole idea of getting back into studying again, and things like that. I found it hard putting pen to paper again.* **(Harry)**

Health

Three of the six participants spoke of health reasons as a key barrier while studying in FET.

> *Sleepless nights I've had many of them. With me caring for my Mam, then the assignments flying in, I feel I can't catch up, then my stress levels go up the wall, then unfortunate this affects my overall wellbeing.* **(Harry)**

> *My sleep is definitely affected by studying; I am a worrier anyway so the slightest thing, my head is ticking over and over. Stressed to the max.* **(Lisa)**

Although the participants did experience health difficulties, it was said,

> *We've only got 8 weeks left and within those 8 weeks I could turn around and say to myself what are you doing to yourself. But then I think, that would be a whole waste of another year, but it is hard to come in when you're feeling low.* **(Harry)**

Financial

Three out of the six participants had difficulty with their financial situation,

> *I have found it quite hard yeah at first because of the circumstances at work when I went to the social welfare office I was entitled to nothing you know so I was not happy with that, I still have the same bills even though I am not working. Maybe if there was some kind of grant that might make it a bit easier*. **(Lisa)**

Harry did struggle financially as he said, *" bills can build up and that can get on top of you".* Patrick found one the challenges for him was money *"your not on a full wage, your getting paid by the dole but once I manage my money I'm ok".* Money, or the lack of money was challenging for Lisa, Harry, and Patrick, however the Vocational

Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS) and the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) are essential supports to those wishing to return to FET. VTOS and BTEI schemes are available to those who are in receipt of a Social Protection payment. Adults wishing to return to FET and who are in receipt of a Social Protection payment for at least six months it may be possible for them to enter a course and keep their payments. This deemed difficult for Lisa as she had not been unemployed for six months but she was determined to get on the course and took the matter further. Eventually, Lisa did get to avail of the VTOS scheme. As she stated, "*I'm on the VTOS scheme now, but the payment is no different, it just means you don't have to go and sign on, but it means I can stay here* ". Lisa, Harry, and Patrick were constraint financially but the VTOS payment enabled them to continue in their studies. For Annemarie, Geraldine and Noel financial issues were not prominent.

Juggling roles

Many adult learners can find juggling of roles quite challenging when they return to education. The multiple roles adults perform spouse, mother, carer, worker, student, and friend can create conflict with oneself. Geraldine has been in and out of adult education for the last few years. She is committed to her education but at times she finds herself getting pulled in every direction and finds herself fighting with herself because she feels that when she is spending time doing her assignments she should be spending time with her son, and vice versa.

> *It's hard, I found myself crying one day because you have all these assignments and my son is saying 'mammy I want to go here, mammy I want to go there. I'm trying to do the work and trying to keep him happy. I do feel guilty sometimes and then end up being annoyed with myself.* **(Geraldine)**

For those who have children, feelings of guilt from the mother role combined with feelings of guilt on behalf of the student role was challenging at times.

> *It's very difficult to do your assignments when you have to look after the kids or have to do the dinner and then it's their homework and so you're tired by the end of the day it's hard to juggle and to get a balance between college and home life, and I don't get much support from my ma, like even if I was in my ma's, I don't go there that often because it is just negative all the time, so that can be disheartening".* **(Lisa)**

However, the juggling of roles becomes part and parcel of the experience in FET.

> *I really have to prioritize. I have gotten to the stage that housework is not every thing. So what if dishes are there for a while. Its only a house, I'm also a scout leader, and kids are in GAA so If I get all that done then it all goes OK.* (**Annemarie**)

Sense of belonging

Five participants lived local to the college and knew of the college but on arrival on the first day back in FET the sense of not feeling they belonged in the educational environment was apparent.

> *That sense of not being good enough, feeling embarrassed when you enter into the classroom, those feelings of self-doubt, that little voice saying what are you doing here, your wasting your time.* (**Geraldine**)

> *Am I to old for this class, am I going to look ridiculous, am I going to be years ahead of them all.* (**Lisa**)

> *For a while I felt that I should not be here, that I would not be able for it. Other people seem to be more confident coming into this.* (**Annemarie**)

Noel had some reservations of returning to the classroom, but he did not have that feeling of not belonging. "*As soon as I walked into the nursery (garden plot) I knew that I'd be all right*". Harry had reservations about putting pen to paper again, but he settled into FET from the outset

> *I work better in small classes, rather than in big lecture halls where there is probably 600 students, that I found very daunting. I felt like I should not have been there in university, but here it's different.* (**Harry**)

Despite this sense of not belonging Geraldine, Lisa and Annemarie settled in within a few days. All spoke of the supportive nature of the tutors, their peers and of the egalitarian environment that put them at ease.

Workload

There was a concern over the workload and the confidence of producing the work in a limited timeframe.

> *Not thinking my work is up to scratch yeah that would be a big factor. I'm inclined to doubt myself all the time and I'm not good at making deadlines, procrastination, there are a lot of things.* **(Harry)**

However, Harry did his assignments on campus as he said he was more focused and would not get distracted. Annemarie, Lisa and Patrick did not dedicate time on the campus to complete assignments, as they felt they worked better at home.

The classroom environment

This key finding the classroom environment was a contentious issue for four of the participants, however two of the participants did not express concern on this issue. The participants spoke of the disruptive nature of some of the adult learners and how this was having an impact on the overall learning experience in the classroom.

> *People talking in the classroom it really annoys me, like the tutor is explaining something in the classroom and some students just start talking about something that is totally not related to the course, I feel this is very disruptive, because I forget then what the tutor was talking about, then I feel myself slipping away.* **(Patrick)**

> *I can get very frustrated in the class, I do try to listen cause I feel I need to listen, and when the messing goes on, people talking over the tutors and all, sometimes I have to just leave the class, not as much now as I used to at the start, but sometimes I do have to get up and just go to the bathroom cause I can feel myself getting agitated.* **(Lisa)**

> *Some just won't stop talking about things that have nothing to do with the class, and you can see some people getting really annoyed with that.* **(Annemarie)**

For many adult learners returning to education it is a choice. Adults return to FET for various reasons, some for personal development, up-skilling, and some for seeking employment. However it was said that some of the learners are there because they have to be there.

> *You're in the class, you're there for a reason, everyone is supposed to be there for a reason, but I suppose there are the one's who have to be there.* **(Annemarie)**

> *I don't think they should allow friends to do a course you know what I mean because like do two friends really want to go down the same road. Are they doing it for just for the sake of something to do, or are they there because they have to be there.* **(Lisa)**

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Reasons to persist?

- Support
- Better myself
- Will to learn
- Resilience

Support

A key factor that contributed to participant's pushing through the academic year was the support of the course coordinators and the tutors within the educational environment. The most significant factor here to the persistence of the participants was that the coordinators and the tutors were supportive and understanding of the various challenges faced outside of the institution. Annemarie said "*all the tutors are very helpful, and have an understanding and know that people have kids, and that things can happen in life*". While Lisa was reflecting on the relationships she had developed with the tutors she said "*I probably would not have stuck it this long without them. I just think they're fantastic some of them motivate me so much*" and Geraldine spoke of how the tutors " *got to know people's personalities and then you got to know them, then you know how to kind of work together*. While Annemarie, Lisa and Geraldine spoke of the supportive nature of the tutors, Patrick added that "*the tutors would be very supportive and give you feedback; I think I need that reassurance that I am kind of on the right path you know that way*. Support and feedback reassured Patrick on his journey whereas communication between tutor and learner was good for Harry as he said, " *What doesn't happen at third level, the coordinator will ring and see what's going on and ask why I haven't been in. That was good too. The contact is good*". The personalities and attitudes of tutors are of great importance to learners. Fundamentally, tutors who are friendly, supportive, and interested are crucial to adult learner persistence.

For Harry the support of peers helped when he was struggling on a deeper level. He said his peers went above and beyond to make sure he was ok "*friends called into me on more than one occasion to make sure I was ok, and to see why I hadn't been in, and that was great*". Having a supportive family assisted Annemarie in her commitment and persistence in FET, as she said,

> *Well I live at home with my two kids, but live very close to my mam and my*

brother lives with her. And because I start at nine and the kids start at nine I drop the kids up to my mam at 8.20 and she drops the kids to school for me. If she didn't I would miss the first class every day. **(Annemarie)**

Lisa's partner and children were very supportive of her decision to return to education. Lisa has always valued education and from this she said, "*all her children are achieving academically and her partner has taking the step and entered adult education to seek how to read and write*". Although institutional factors such as support from coordinators, tutors, peers, and family play a role in persistence, the participants also spoke of the possibility of new opportunities available to them when they get the qualification.

Better myself

This term came up many times within the interviews. 'Better Myself' when I asked what was meant by 'better myself' five of the participant's spoke of achieving the qualification to attain a better job. The want to move up the ladder in employment and the prospects of gaining employment was evident in the participant's narratives. In return of gaining a qualification and securing employment many said that this would give them the possibility of new opportunities.

> *But yea, I want to make something of me life, and I have always known that I want to get an education, and that's why I push myself even though some days it's hard, but I know it is for the best, I know I wont be able to 'better myself' and get a job if I can't read or write properly, so I push through.* **(Geraldine)**

> *I loved my job with the senior citizen, but there was no were to go in the job. I want to move up the ladder and there was no opportunity for me to do that in the job. So I decided this was the time to bite the bullet and go back and get myself an education so I can get a job where I can move up the ladder, you know that sort of way.* **(Lisa)**

> *I would just like to get a proper job out of it, a qualification were I could get various levels of promotion.* **(Annemarie)**

Patrick's determination and drive to project himself into education to seek the right kind of employment, is one of the factor that contributes to his persistence in education. As he said,

My motivation may go down a little bit, like sometimes I may go home and you can go I'm not touching a piece of paper, but then you think yourself you know this is going to 'better me'. Get your head down, get the qualification, and get a job. **(Patrick)**

While some participants were was so matter of fact about getting the qualification to better themselves, Noel on the other hand was not there for the qualification or to gain employment, he was purely there for his own satisfaction and his personal growth.

Anyway so I'm not really in here in to get a job, I mean it's for my own satisfaction my own personal growth. **(Noel)**

Noels love of gaining new information and engaging in the learning from the practical side of the course to been within the classroom was a contributor to his staying on the course. While institutional and the possibility of new opportunities are important to the persistence of adult learners in FET, fundamentally adult learners stay the course because they push themselves forward and project themselves into their studies and consequently develop autonomy which is a significant element of the will to learn.

Will to learn

Lisa spoke of her experience of compulsory education, she said, *"I never got involved in education the way I should have"* Lisa had a negative experience of compulsory education *"but I always knew I would come back someday"*. She returned to education to prove to herself and to others that she was capable of achieving an education and in doing so facing the negative experiences of her formal education. Although Lisa finds herself amongst the constraints and challenges of everyday life she is determined to do this one thing for herself which is 'stay in education". Lisa goes on to say that one of the reasons for staying on course when she felt like dropping out was she knew she wanted to stay in education for herself. She said,

This is probably the second thing in my life that I am actually doing for me, I'm not doing it for the fun of it, I want to prove to myself and to others that I am capable, and I'm not thick. **(Lisa)**

Annemarie loved her experience of compulsory education and succeeded and entered third level education. Annemarie got all honour subjects in her Leaving Certificate and went straight into university. Annemarie became pregnant with her second child and she

decided to leave the degree programme at the end of first year due to family commitments. She maintained,

> *I don't have any regrets; I did not want to leave my kids in crèche so I made the choice to leave university with the intention of returning when the kids were in school.* **(Annemarie)**

Annemarie returned to FET six years later when her children were settled in school. Annemarie spoke of her love of learning, her love of the course, she said, *"even when I was going to work experience I was really excited. I found something I really like to do.*

Harry left school before completing his education. Harry went straight into employment from school. He was in and out of work, and then decided to return to FET. He completed his Leaving Certificate, from there he did a university access programme, which he passed, and then he entered third level education. Harry did not complete his degree programme due to personal reasons but he was open and honest with himself with his decision. He said,

> *I do have major regrets, but I suppose the time was just not right. I must stop thinking of the negative and think more about the positives. I'm back in education and doing ok, so I want to continue and get back to third level some day.* **(Harry).**

Harry had to wait a year to get on his chosen course of study in FET. He started the course last September 2015 but applied for the course the previous year. The course is a popular choice for learners and Harry had to go on a waiting list. Within this time Harry obtained voluntary work to 'get hands on experience' and then he could relate this back to the course content. He was determined to get on this course because this is the area where he 'wanted to seek employment'. Harry did come into difficulties in relation to his overall wellbeing as he said,

> *It was around Christmas time I missed a bit of time and I did have thoughts about leaving the course because the longer I was out the harder I found to get back into it. I found I had lost so much ground, but I made a promise to myself this time around that no matter how tough things got I was not going to leave.* **(Harry)**

Harry became determined in the face of adversity and he immersed himself back into the learning, he engaged with the extra resources provided by the tutors and got notes from his peers, which he said " *I'm indebted to them for that support".*

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Patrick like Harry was an early school leaver. Patrick left school and went straight into employment. He worked in retail for many years and decided he wanted to achieve an education. He returned to FET and completed his Leaving Certificate while working. He juggled his roles as student and worker and at first he found this difficult, but he was very disciplined with his schedule *"I got it into my head this is what I wanted to do, so I organized my work around my college hours and stuck to it"*. After completion of the Leaving Certificate Patrick got employment but due to factors beyond his control he became unemployed. This gave Patrick the bite for education and he decided to return to FET for a third time. He immersed himself back into the learning in pursuit of his goals.

Geraldine spoke of the overwhelming feeling and the feelings of self-doubt, but she was adamant that you have to overcome the negative feelings, it's hard, but if it's the right time, and you have the right support networks, you can do it.

> *I went through a lot when I was younger, and I want to help people to show them that that you can better yourself if you want to, you just need to put your mind down to it.* **(Geraldine)**

Geraldine's turbulent start in life has given her the power to reflect on her situation and this drives her commitment to her education in the hope that one day she can help people who are less fortunate than others.

Lisa reflects on her journey and says,

> *If I can do anything to encourage anybody in my situation to go for it I would without a doubt. I would even push them and I would walk in the front door with them definitely. I have noticed a change in myself in the last six months.* **(Lisa)**

Resilience

Lisa recalled a time when '*things were getting in on her*" assignments were piling up, and the classroom environment was full of tension '*you know something happened that day and it was going to continue tomorrow*'. I was up at 3.20 am and still doing an assignment '*I just started to cry and said I wasn't going* back' but she did get up the next morning after only two hours sleep and went into college. She decided to talk to the class in relation to how she felt about the '*stuff that was going on*' and she decided not to listen to the individuals who were '*putting a dampener on her experience*'. She

felt she had to be honest with the group as the negative tension in the classroom was having a negative effect on her learning experience, but because she wanted to stay in education she acknowledged the situation and any thoughts of dropping out lessened. She also knew deep down that she would not quit because she *"wanted to teach her girls not to quit when things got tough*. Being a good role model to their children are important as, Annemarie also stated that one the deciding factors that stopped her from dropping out was " her kids".

Annemarie talked about the disruptive behaviour of some of the learners in the classroom and how this had an effect on the learning experience. She said there were times *"when I got sick of it and had thoughts of dropping out"* but *"at the end of the day I'm not here for them, I'm here for me, and my kids. It does not matter if they are chatting I will get my work done in anyway.* Patrick also got annoyed and frustrated with the disruptive behavior in the classroom but their willingness to engage in the learning despite the classroom challenges demonstrates a real commitment to their education.

This research explored the challenges adult learners experience whilst in FET, and the reasons they persist despite these challenges. Based on this study the challenges the participants experienced while in FET were nervousness, health, finance, juggling of roles, sense of belonging, workload and the classroom environment, and the reasons for persistence were support, the want of a better life 'Better Myself", the will to learn and resilience. Participant's feelings of nervousness and a sense of not belonging at the beginning of the course were evident however with the tutor's reassurance, their peers, and the egalitarian environment put them at ease. Health reasons were sited by three of the participants; sleepless nights and the worry of paying the bills resulted in higher levels of stress.

Although participants were constraint financially the VTOS payment enabled them to continue on in their education. Further, their vision of attaining a qualification to get a better job in the hope of achieving a better life was strong. The jugging of roles became part and parcel of their experience in FET and their resilience to adapt to their individual situation is commendable. The challenges of nervousness, health, finance, juggling of roles and sense of belonging were important findings from this study

however the key challenge faced by the participants was 'the classroom environment' the disruptive nature of other learners in the classroom was of significance to this study. Participants reflected on their learning experience within the classroom and individuals been disruptive did have a negative impact on their learning. However, the participant's will to learn and determination to attain an education helped them acknowledge and name the situation, which in turn increased their capacity to deal with the situation and carry on. Reflecting back on the findings six of the participant's exercised their agency to pursue their goals. As mentioned earlier adult learners return to education for various reasons, but having that choice and acting upon it takes commitment, persistence, and resilience. Returning to education, as an adult leaner can be a very daunting experience and the fear, anxiety, the feeling of not belonging can be too extreme for some. But for the participants of this study the push and the determination to better themselves was strong, the will to learn was the driving force that helped them overcome the challenges to achieve that goal of what they hope will be a better life.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the themes and findings that emerged from the participant's stories. The participants did experience challenges within and outside the education environment, but the will to learn, their persistence and resilience was the push factors to completing their courses of choice. These findings suggest that by taking the first step to return to education, this can have significant results of conscientization, and as a result adult learners develop a greater sense of agency. Nevertheless, for all, this has not been a linear journey and each has confronted the many challenges and embraced the many highs along their educational trajectory.

CHAPTER FIVE
ANALYSIS/ DISCUSSION

The preceding chapter presented the findings of this study. In the findings I have identified the various challenges adult learners experience while studying in FET and the reasons they persist despites these challenges. In the previous chapter I tried to avoid overly interpreting the findings, as I wanted to remain close to the personal accounts and experiences of the participants. This chapter however will engage the findings with the literature to help illuminate the participant narratives and to get a deeper understanding of persistence in FET in Ireland.

Based on this research adult learners struggle with a myriad of personal, structural and institutional factors whilst studying in FET, however despite these challenges I discovered that adult learners have a remarkable ability to interpret their situation and take action to continue in education, whether their educational journey is linear or not, to pursue their goals. Five of the six participants of this study have 'dipped in' and 'out' of adult education at some point in their life due to other responsibilities, therefore their educational journey has not been linear. Five of the six participants were not confident learners but they had a thirst and commitment for knowledge and used their agency in different ways to counter personal, structural, and institutional factors. I see many adult learners exercising their power within the social structures to pursue their goals. I suppose it can be argued that social actors are reproducing and serving the system, by the processes, activities and relations within the social structures, but it is argued people need to become aware of the social structures, and the primacy of relations within social structures, then they can interpret situations rather than merely being shaped by them (Sayer, 2000). The participants of this study have persisted through adult education to achieve the goal of what they hope will be a better life. Based on this study, in my view human agency is a fundamental factor that contributes to persistence and this phenomena is something that perhaps is overlooked or underestimated in the literature.

On exploration of persistence in FET the findings of this study led me to understand persistence from the learner's perspective. Persistence from the learner's perspective acknowledges that learners may be 'dipping out' of education for a while due to other responsibilities. As we can recall from the literature, a number of studies propose that there is a difference in understanding persistence between the provider and the learner

(Carpentieri, 2007; Crowther et al. 2010; Comings, 2007; Hagedorn, 2012). Carpentieri (2007) suggests inconsistent does not necessarily mean non-persistent. So, while from a provider's standpoint a learner may appear to be irregularly engaged in learning, from a learner's perspective periods of formal provision, sandwiched by breaks of self-directed study or just meeting the demands of life may be natural and rational elements in a lifelong learning journey. This concurs with my study as for five of the participants this has not been their first time studying in FET, and two participant's entered University, but chose not to pursue their course of study at that particular time of their lives.

> *I do have major regrets, but I suppose the time was just not right. I must stop thinking of the negative and think more about the positives. I'm back in education and doing ok, so I want to continue on and get back to third level some day. Harry*

> *I don't have any regrets; I did not want to leave my kids in crèche so I made the choice to leave UCD with the intention of returning when the kids were in school.* Annemarie

In my view the participant's made a decision to withdraw from their programmes as the time was not right, due to personal and structural factors. While Harry regretted not completing the degree programme, on reflection he came to the realisation that the bereavement he suffered triggered a decline in his over all wellbeing and the studying escalated the problem. Therefore he chose to leave the course with the vision of returning one day. He exercised his agency to make the decision to 'dip out' of his educational journey because at that moment in time his well-being was paramount. Annemarie on the other hand did not have any regrets leaving the degree programme. She decided to leave the programme due to family commitments, but she knew she would return to education when her children were in school. In this instance Annemarie's responsibilities to her family superseded her responsibilities to her studies but again she made a conscious decision at that point in her life to 'dip out' of her education journey but would one day return. Both Harry and Annemarie exercised their human agency to leave the degree programme, albeit for different reasons and both made a choice to return to education when the time felt right for them.

In exploring the challenges and the reasons why adult learners persist in FET, the findings of this study have unveiled that learner's educational journey can be complex. This study discovered that personal, structural and institutional factors could affect persistence in FET. This reflects McGivneys (1993, p. 11) argument "that there is no

single factor that can satisfactorily explain participation or non-participation". The literature suggests that a matrix of factors, and a trajectory of challenges and institutional, internal, and external experiences influence a student's decision to persist or not persist in adult education.

Tinto's (1993) model of integration views the institution as a social system with its own values and social structures. He argues that integration is the result of two factors, the degree of congruence that develops between the learner and the value patterns of the college collectively, and the satisfactory interaction with other students and staff members in the college. Tinto (1993) identified "five factors that influence persistence; feedback, support, involvement, expectations and learning. The findings from this study are in concurrence with what Tinto (1993) argues are influential to persistence.

Reflecting back on this study for Lisa, Annemarie, Geraldine, Harry and Patrick the first few days in the college were a major struggle *"I was a nervous wreck I didn't even know if I was going to walk in that door the first day…would they be all young and well educated…would I be lost"* **(Lisa).** Annemarie *"was nervous cause it was 6 years since I'd been in education"* and Harry was *"nervous because the whole idea of getting back into the studying again".* " *The feelings of self-doubt, of that voice in your head saying what are you doing here, you're wasting your time"* **(Geraldine).** The anxiety Geraldine, Lisa, Harry, Patrick experienced at the beginning of their course may have stemmed from their initial experience of compulsory education, as that experience was not memorable one. This could have contributed to the low levels of confidence and nerves when they returned to the educational environment. But the participants faced their fear and *"after a few days, I was thinking what was I panicking about"* **(Patrick).** Although the participants quickly overcame these initial difficulties, the first few days can be a 'make or break' ordeal with implications for persistence of adult learners.

A key factor that contributed to participant's pushing through the academic year was the support of the course coordinators and the tutors within the educational environment. The most significant factor here to the persistence of the participants was that the coordinators and the tutors were supportive and understanding of the various challenges faced outside of the institution. Annemarie said *"all the tutors are very helpful, and have an understanding and know that people have kids, and that things can happen in*

life". While Lisa was reflecting on the relationships she had developed with the tutors she said *"I probably would not have stuck it this long without them. I just think they're fantastic some of them motivate me so much"* and Geraldine spoke of how the tutors " *got to know people's personalities and then you got to know them, then you know how to kind of work together.* While Annemarie, Lisa and Geraldine spoke of the supportive nature of the tutors, Patrick added that *"the tutors would be very supportive and give you feedback; I think I need that reassurance that I am kind of on the right path you know that way.* Support and feedback reassured Patrick on his journey whereas communication between tutor and learner was good for Harry as he said, " *What doesn't happen at third level, the coordinator will ring and see what's going on and ask why I haven't been in. That was good too. The contact is good".* The personalities and attitudes of tutors are of great importance to learners. Fundamentally, tutors who are friendly, supportive, and interested and who give feedback are crucial to adult learner and persistence.

Moreover, four out of the six participants all had a good network of family and friends, this reflects a study by Fleming and Finnegan, 2010, this study argued that non-traditional students benefited greatly from the firm collaborations, friendships and networks of support they formed as they persisted in college and universities. On the other hand, two participant's did not have that support network with the family, but they decided this was not going to stop them " I'm going to prove them wrong" **(Lisa).** However, all the participant's spoke of the support of the tutor's, their family and their peers and identified these, as been a contributing factor to persistence in FET.

A key finding of this study was the classroom environment. In this study the participants reported that the disruptive nature of some of the students could have a significant effect on the learning experience within the classroom. In my view, adult education is about giving people choice. Based on my research adult education has given individuals a choice to exercise their agency in pursuit of their goals. However it was said that some of the learners within the classroom were there because they had to be there. As Annemarie stated *"Your in the class, your there for a reason, everyone is suppose to be there for a reason, but I suppose there are the one's who have to be here.* In relation to my research, I am arguing that the literature is perhaps overlooking or underestimating the phenomena of human agency, the choice to take action. However,

what does it say when 'Labour Activation Policy's' are put in place and FET is made compulsory to adults who are in receipt of a social welfare payment. The Department of Education and Skills states that: A range of education and training is provided by various organisations aimed at up-skilling and re-skilling people who are unemployed (DES 2015). Concurring with this, the many programmes offered by the CDETB are directed at learners who are long-term unemployed and young people. This is in line with 'Pathways to work Activation Policy' and the 'Youth Implementation Plan" (FET, Service Plan, 2004, p.105). Based on this study some learners may be in FET involuntary. This Reflects back to O'Reilly's argument that,

> Rather than individuals participating in FET voluntary, spurred on by their on aspirations, within this new FET process individuals are steered to take up the opportunities that are available to them or risk the loss of unemployment payment (O'Reilly, 2014, p. 163).

Based on this research, learners may be in FET involuntary. Consequently, this can bring disruption and chaos into the learning environment, which I feel undermines the whole idea of adult education as being collaborative, cooperative, and voluntary. The classroom environment, the disruptive nature of other learners in the classroom was of significance to this study. Participants reflected on their learning experience within the classroom and individuals been disruptive did have a negative impact on their learning. However, the participant's will to learn and determination to attain an education helped them acknowledge and name the situation, which in turn increased their capacity to deal with the situation and carry on.

Merrill (2015) argued that Tinto's model negates to take into account the students socio-economic and cultural backgrounds however a significant factor to the participants of this study was that the coordinators and the tutors were supportive and understanding of the various challenges faced outside of the institution. Annemarie said "*all the tutors are very helpful, and have an understanding and know that people have kids, and that things can happen in life*". This finding suggests that, although Tinto's model views the institution as a social system with its own values and social structure, the tutors (actors) involved within the institution are cognizant of factors outside the institution. However it is important to note that the integration of young full time students is central to Tinto's theory. This is not the case in FET in Ireland where part-time and mature students have been a large proportion of the student population.

Nevertheless, for the participant's of this study external factors to the institution were paramount. The impact of personal and structural factors can have a significant effect on a learner's decision to persist or withdraw. Hardiman (2012) and Bean and Metnzer (1985) maintained that for adult learners the traditional social environment of the college was not nearly as important. What are important to the adult learner are external issues. Outside concerns such as personal issues, finance, the juggling of roles and other commitments. Hinton-Smith (2008) supports this argument, as she propose that adult learners were trying to manage their multiple roles and did not know whether they would manage to integrate academic life with their various commitments.

This reflects this study as finance and the juggling of roles were indicated of being relating to the participants and their persistence in FET. Lisa, Harry and Patrick were constraint financially *"your not on a full wage, your getting paid by the dole but once I manage my money I'm ok"* **(Patrick)** however the VTOS payment from the Social Protection Office enabled them to continue in their studies, *"I'm on the VTOS scheme now, but the payment is no different, it just means you don't have to go and sign on, but it means I can stay here"* **(Lisa).** All the participants spoke of the challenges they experienced with the juggling of roles. The juggling of roles was instrumental in the findings. However the juggling of roles became part and parcel of their experience in FET. Annemarie came to the realisation that she had to prioritise her roles, *"housework is not every thing. So what if dishes are there for a while. Its only a house, I'm also a scout leader, and kids are in GAA so If I get all that done then it all goes OK"*. .

All the participants in my study spoke of issues such as confidence, self-doubt, and some spoke of health reasons that can affect persistence in FET. Harry said he was *"inclined to doubt myself all the time and I'm not good at making deadlines, procrastination, there are a lot of things.* **(Harry).** However Harry overcame these challenges by doing his assignments on the campus as he said he would be more focused and would not get distracted. However, due to Harry caring for his Mam and the *"assignments piling up"* Harrys stress levels increased and this effected his overall wellbeing. This concurs with the literature as Christie, Munro and Fisher (2004) suggest that what might be bearable for one student may not be bearable for another, students coping skills are critical to their overall well being. Hope and Dring (2005) argue that

chronic stress was cited as having a negative impact on the overall quality of life and learning ability of students. For Lisa she was "stressed to to max" but she organised her time and studied one module each night and this helped her focus. Though experiencing these problems the participants were determined to push through, and were resilient in the face of adversity.

According to Hardiman (2012) many FET colleges are well established in their local communities and do not carry connotations of elitism that can be associated with other higher institutions or universities. As mentioned earlier the college this research took place is well established and accessible to the community. The research site accommodates people from the local area. Patrick, Harry, and Geraldine had previous experience in the college; they were ready to come even though they had feelings of apprehension. However, Universities hold connotations of greater elitism and cultural difference, this reflects this this study as Harry has been to University and said,

> *I work better in small classes, rather than in big lecture halls where there is probably 600 students, that I found very daunting. I felt like I should not have been there in university, but here it's different.* **(Harry)**

Harry felt more at ease in the college of FET in comparison to the university he felt like what Reay et al. (2009) refers to as being like a 'fish out of water' and therefore return to their familiar habitus. Conversely, when Harry returned to FET he in Bourdieu's words encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 127). The perception of FET in Ireland as accessible is one of the sector's great strengths.

In my view, and from my practice the research site adjusts to the diverse needs of the student population and promotes a friendly and inviting environment. Essentially, it embraces diversity of the student population. Further, the habitus of this college is inclusive and accepting of difference, and does not prioritize one set of characteristics, but rather celebrates and prizes diversity and difference. And as a result, students from diverse backgrounds can find greater acceptance of and respect for their own practices and knowledge and this in turn will promote higher levels of persistence in adult education. This reflects a study by (Thomas, 2002) she argued that institutions should

be inclusive, accepting of differences and not prioritize one set of characteristics and this will promote greater levels of persistence.

Essentially the assumptions of Tinto's theoretical model suggest that the institution promotes a milieu for persistence and integration and it is up to the individual student to integrate into college life. On the other hand, Merrill (2015) and Reay's (2010) approach draws on the work of Bourdieu. This approach focuses on the institution and its 'institutional habitus' rather than focusing on the individual student. Both of these models although very influential in the literature, based on this study, in my view, both underestimate the human element of persistence. Both emphasize the institutions as contributing to persistence but in my view they under emphasizes the will of the human being. The relationship between agency and structure is significant in social research as both agency and structural factors play a role in influencing human activity. Therefore although institutions play an important role in persistence we must not forget that the human will or agency of a person is a significant quality to persistence and without it, learning will not take place.

According to Sayer (2000), "individuals in virtue of their physical make up, socialisation and education are able to work; indeed they have this power even when they are currently unemployed or idle" (p. 10). Further, the effectiveness in "producing change depends on their practical adequacy, on how they relate to the constraints and opportunities of the context in which they are proposed (Sayer, 2002, p. 25). Based on this research, in my view, the participants of this study have the power to achieve an education or not, even if there experience is fraught with constraints and challenges within and outside of the educational institution. Annemarie persisted on her educational journey to equip herself with the qualification to attain employment to give her children a better life. Lisa persisted in education to overcome her negative experience of compulsory education and to prove to herself she was capable of achieving an education and hence she could attain a job, which had room for improvement. Noel, Harry, and Patrick all hit a crisis in their lives, Noel's ill health, Harry's experience of a bereavement and Patrick experiencing unemployment were significant events to their educational trajectory, however the human will the participants possess and their ability to project themselves back into their studies despite these events is remarkable. Learners have not had a linear journey. As mentioned earlier

five of the six participants had previous experience of FET, two had experience of university. All have 'dipped out' of adult education at some time on their educational journey, and all have decided to 'dip back in', in the pursuit of new possibilities and the want of a better life. In my view, the participant's in this study used their agency and exercised their power to interpret and adapt to their individual situations, which makes it possible to understand how we could be, or become many things, which currently we are not. This research identifies that learners experiences of persistence is complex, but it also identifies that the future is open and there is "both necessity and possibility or potential in the world" (Sayer, 2000, p. 11)

Conclusion

In relation to my findings, and to how individuals act in their world despite constraints and challenges, I would argue that both Tinto and Bourdieu underestimate the fundamental factor of human agency. For me human agency is the action people take in order to transform and change their lives. On one hand, Tinto (1975) maintains that the student needs to fit in and adapt to the college environment. On the other, Bourdieu (1992) posits institutions favour the dominant ideology and this can affect decisions made by learners. I maintain that both Bourdieu and Tinto are focusing greatly on the institutions as being contributors to persistence, Tinto suggesting it's the person has to fit in to the college, whereas Bourdieu suggests that no, it's the college who needs to adapt to the diversity of the student population. While these models are very influential in the role of education, in my view they both overlook the human being and the phenomena of human agency as being a fundamental factor to persistence, and in my view they both overlook or underestimate the strength and power we possess, which can make it "possible to understand how we could be or become many things which currently we are not" (Sayer, 2000, p. 12).

CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

This research explored the phenomena of persistence of adult learners in a college of further education and training (FET) in Ireland. It was suggested in the introduction that this research was set against a backdrop of a changing FET system and the system is highly influenced by wider policy reform in education. It was also suggested that FET reform in the Irish context was "focused on creating the right opportunities for Irish adults" (DES, 2014, p. 18). However that while creating the right opportunities for adults learners in FET is important, we must not forget that adults who choose to return to FET are generating new opportunities and pursing their goal of the want of a better life. The aim of this study was to explore the various challenges adult learners experience whist studying in FET, and the reasons they persist despite these challenges? This research strongly resonates with my own educational journey however I sought to explore the phenomena of persistence through the adult learners narratives, which were all studying in a college of FET.

Based on this research adult learners return to education for a variety of reasons. The participants of this study returned to education to generate new opportunities in the hope of what would be a better life. However their education trajectories were not that straightforward. The participants experienced many problems while studying in FET but despite these problems all the participants had an affinity with education, they had a will to learn, they became resilient to the challenges, and all completed their QQI Major Award.

The findings from this research suggest that the challenges learners experience while in FET are complex. It is the interplay between the self, institution and external commitments. This research has argued that adult leaners can develop resilience, a thirst and a commitment for knowledge, and will persist in learning whether or not a linear educational journey, until they achieve their goals. The research unveiled seven challenges that can affect persistence in FET. These were, nervousness, health, finance, juggling of roles, workload, sense of belonging and the classroom environment and four reasons to persist, support, better myself, will to learn and resilience.

The participants overcame the challenges of nervousness and sense of belonging as they pushed themselves to enter the college on that first day or pushed themselves to return the second day, and the support and reassurance from the co-ordinators and the tutors were significant in keeping them going. Stress levels can effect adult learners while in FET, bills have to paid, assignments piling up, procrastination sets in, this can all effect the learners overall wellbeing, but for the participants of this study the VTOS scheme payment enabled them to carry on the course and although they were constraint financially once they managed their money they coped. Stress levels and assignments are part of an educational journey however participants organisation and prioritising skills came to the fore, Harry stayed on the campus to do his assignments so this made him more focused and for Lisa she studied one subject a night. The participants used their agency in different ways to over come the challenge of rising stress levels. All the participants spoke of the challenges they experienced with the juggling of roles. The juggling of roles was instrumental in the findings. However the juggling of roles became part and parcel of their experience in FET. Annemarie came to the realisation that she had to prioritise her roles, "*housework is not every thing. So what if dishes are there for a while. Its only a house, I'm also a scout leader, and kids are in GAA so If I get all that done then it all goes OK*". Although nervousness, health, finance, juggling of roles, workload and sense of belonging were important, a key finding was the classroom environment. These seven challenges were instrumental in the participant's educational trajectory, however all the participants exercised their agency albeit in different ways and were resilient in the face of adversity.

A key finding of this study was the classroom environment. The disruptive nature of some of the students within the classroom did have a significant effect on the participants learning experience. The findings of this study suggest that learners may be in FET involuntary. "Iindividual's are steered to take up the opportunities that are available to them, or risk the loss of unemployment payment" (O'Reilly, 2014, p. 163). Consequently, this has brought disruption and chaos into the learning environment. Participants reflected on their learning experience within the classroom and individuals been disruptive did have a negative impact on their learning. However, the participant's will to learn and determination to attain an education helped them acknowledge and name the situation, which in turn increased their capacity to deal with the situation and carry on. From my perspective this key finding undermines the whole idea of adult

education as being collaborative, cooperative, and voluntary. According to the FET strategy excellent learning experiences should be available to FET students as

> FET in Ireland aims to deliver a high quality learning experience leading to better outcomes for all those who engage in it. It aims to support economic development, social inclusion, and meet the needs of all leaners, communities and employers who engage with FET. (DES, 2014, p. 4).

This finding begs the question, whose needs are being met?" If individuals are taking up courses in fear of losing their Social Protection payment, this will have a detrimental effect on the future of FET. Further, in my view, the significant shift from adult education policies directed at lifelong learning towards labour market activation this shift will have a significant effect on the learning experiences of all who avail of FET programmes. The economic and employment-related discussions that dominate the FET sector will under-emphasise the narrative on personal development, reflecting the underestimation of agency in Tinto and Bourdieu institutional models and education as a right that "allows learners to become more fully human, to become conscious of their world"…contributes to personal discovery, increased confidence, increased agency and a capacity to shape's one's world and community" (O'Reilly, 2014, p. 163) will be underplayed.

Further from my perspective, persistence of adult learners who choose to return to FET is a significant human quality; the will to learn, to engage, to explore and to keep going forward despite constraints is remarkable. On reflection, I would argue that both Tinto and Bourdieu underestimate the fundamental factor of human agency. The power to take action in order to transform and change ones life is commendable. I maintain that both Bourdieu and Tinto are focusing greatly on the institutions as being contributors to persistence and underestimate the power of the human being. As mentioned earlier for five of the participants of this study, this has not been the first time studying in FET. Two of the participants have been to university, but because of the interplay of personal, structural and institutional factors the participants decided to 'dipp out' of their educational journey for a while with the vision of returning to education one day. That vision of the participants came to reality and they returned to FET, some for a third time, in pursuit of their goals. This is a prime example of the power of the individual working within the constraints of everyday life. In my view they both Tinto and

Bourdieu overlook the human being and the phenomena of human agency as being a fundamental factor to persistence, and in my view they both overlook or underestimate the strength and power we possess, which can make it "possible to understand how we could be or become many things which currently we are not" (Sayer, 2000, p. 12). Which brings us back to 'Where there's a will, there's a way".

Implications for this research

The implications of this research will be discussed in relation to policy and practice in FET, and recommendations for future research.

Implications for policy

This research was set against a backdrop of a changing FET system and the system is highly influenced by wider policy reform in education. A key finding of this research was the classroom environment. The findings of this study suggest that learners may be in FET involuntary. Consequently, this has brought disruption and chaos into the learning environment. Participants reflected on their learning experience within the classroom and individuals been disruptive did have a negative impact on their learning. According to the FET strategy excellent learning experiences should be available to all who participate in FET, however this was not the case for the participants of this study as they struggled to go to class everyday because of the disruptive and chaotic environment. Going forward policy developers need to take into account that learner's needs are paramount, and we will not fulfil the economic needs of the country by ignoring the needs of the FET population. Individuals should not be steered to take up the opportunities that are available to them, in the fear of losing their Social Protection payment. Policy developers must not disadvantage individuals who are already disadvantage. Further, policy developers need to consider that adult learners who return to education their journey may not be that straightforward, therefore provision should be made to facilitate an 'irregular' or 'inconsistent' journey.

Implications for practice

This research has provided a clearer picture of the adult learners lived experience and persistence in FET. The information generated from this study will enable adult education providers to situate their programs in such a way to combat the challenges adult learners experience in FET and to enhance those factors that enhance persistence.

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It would also be interesting to discover the perspectives of various providers in adult education on the importance or otherwise on the phenomena of persistence in FET. Finally, the quality of 'human will' and 'agency' needs not only to be recognized but at the heart of it, it needs to be nurtured by practioners in the field of FET, because without it learning will not take place.

Further Research

This research identified the negative experiences of the adult learners within the classroom environment and this has reaching implications. Therefore this research could be the foundation for further exploration of persistence in the FET sector specifically in relation to the learners who are steered to take up the opportunities that are available to them, in fear of losing their Social Protection payment. The effect on compulsory FET on individuals is primarily an injustice to all adult learners. There is still a great deal of research needed on the experience of adult learners in FET specifically on persistence, retention, and non-completion within the sector. The title of this study is where there's a will, there's a way' a further study could be conducted to develop a deeper understanding of where this will is created? Where does this will originate? This leaves us with a question. Can this 'will' be created and if so – how can we create it?

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INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

Dear……………..

My name is Suzanne Fitzpatrick and I would like to invite you to participate in a research study on persistence and the adult learner, as part of my Master's Programme in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University, County Kildare.

The purpose of this study is to get a better understanding of the various challenges adult learners experience during their time in Further Education and Training (FET) and the reasons they persist despite these challenges. Your personal experiences are valuable to my research because it is anticipated that the results may be shared with education providers to enable them to consider the various challenges of adult learners so that your needs might be better met, therefore increasing the chance of persisting and completion for adult learners in FET.

If you decide to participate in the study, I will ask you questions about your experiences in further education and training. You will be asked to complete an interview with me that will last approximately 60 minutes. The interview will include open-ended questions, as I would like to give you the opportunity to tell your story. The interview will be recorded. You are free to refuse to answer any question throughout the interview and finish at any time.

Please be assured that your name will never be used and your answers to the interview questions will be completely confidential, data collected will only be available to my college supervisor and me. In addition, excerpts from the interview will be made part of the final research project. Your personal details will not be included in the report. Your decision to take part in this study is completely voluntary and all the information you provide will be securely stored until the research is completed and will then be destroyed. Additionally, if required you can access the information you provide at any time and you are free to withdraw from the study at anytime.

Please feel free to contact me by phone or email if you need any other information prior

to the interview-taking place. Finally, we can arrange to conduct the interview in a location of your choice.

Thank you for your time.

Researcher: Suzanne Fitzpatrick

Contact details: Suzanne.fitzpatrick.2012@mumail.ie Mobile: 0877409946

Supervisor: Fergal Finnegan

Contact details: Fergal.Finnegan@nuim.ie   Mobile: 0857446338

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

I ……………………….. agree to participate in Suzanne Fitzpatrick's research study.

The purpose of this study has being explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

If I choose to participate in a semi-structured interview, I give permission for my interview with Suzanne Fitzpatrick to be digitally recorded.

I understand I can withdraw from the study, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data prior to the completion of the thesis, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymised material may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications

Signed……………………..   Date……………………….

If for any reason you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the Secretary of Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Could you please tell me about your experience in FET?

Can you tell me a little bit about your previous education experience?

Can you tell me what it was that made you come back into education?

How did you feel when you came back to education?

Can you describe the various challenges you may face whilst studying?

What keeps you going in FET, what motivates you?

What doesn't work so well for you?

Can you describe a time, if any, that you wanted to drop out but decided to continue instead?

If there was a time that you wanted to drop out, what was the deciding factor that kept you in the course?

What, if anything, could be changed in the college to assist students in continuing on the course?

Is there anything more you would like to share in relation to your experience here in FET that has not come up in the interview?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. I appreciate the openness and honesty in each of your responses.