

**Review of Maynooth University's Certificate in Return to Learning
Programme: 1992-2016**

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|------|---|
| BOS | Bristol Online Survey |
| BTEA | Back to Education Allowance |
| DACE | Department of Adult and Community Education |
| DARE | The Disability Access Route to Education |
| DES | Department of Education and Science |
| FC | Foundation Course |
| FE | Further Education |
| HEA | Higher Education Authority |
| HEAR | Higher Education Access Route |
| HEI | Higher Education Institutions |
| ILI | Inclusive learning Initiative |
| LIST | Library Information Support Training |
| NDP | National Development Plan |
| NFQ | National Framework of Qualifications |
| MAP | Maynooth Access Programme |
| MU | Maynooth University |
| NUIM | National University of Ireland Maynooth |
| RTL | Return to Learning |
| TCD | Trinity College Dublin |

Executive Summary

This document reports on research into the Certificate in Return to Learning (RTL) that is delivered by the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University (MU). This research is commissioned by MU Access Programme with the support of the Department of Adult and Community Education. This reporting document has been written as a companion to research by Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2015) which undertook a similar review of the Foundation Certificates in Science and Engineering also offered by Maynooth University.

This research narrates student and staff experiences of the programme, its development within the structures of Maynooth University and its positioning within a broader landscape of access to higher education in Ireland. It also generates statistics on student progression, retention and completion rates.

The following research questions are addressed:

1. In what way does the Certificate in Return to Learning satisfy equality of access criteria?
2. What are the key experiences of students on the programme?
3. What are the progression, retention and performance rates at certificate, undergraduate, and postgraduate level?
4. What is the most sustainable model for the Certificate in Return to Learning in the future?

About the Certificate in Return to Learning

The Certificate in Return to Learning is a one-year, accredited (NFQ level 5) University based programme that offers a re-entry into education for those who have not participated for a number of years. Participants sample a range of subjects and skills that facilitate an informed decision about future undergraduate studies. In terms of models for access Foundation Certificates (FCs), the Certificate in Return to Learning is one of three approaches identified by Murphy (2009), namely a programme delivered by an individual Higher Education Institution (HEI).

Historically, the Return to Learning (RTL) certificate offered a pre-university course in its broadest sense. The logic behind the programme was to offer generic skills that would be useful across a range of courses that were open to all students who could pay the part-time fee. Where possible these fees were part-funded with the support of civil society, and welfare based organisations. Although fees for the programme have varied over the years, the current fee for the RTL stands at €1,000.

The certificate in RTL has historically, and to this day, attracted adult learners from target populations often named within national policy on Access. To this point, the RTL mostly appeals to those who fall within the mature student categorisation; a target population repeatedly identified in the national access policy.

The RTL is delivered part-time over one year with 100 contact hours. Current modules are:

- Motivation and Goals
- Taking Notes
- Writing Skills
- Reading Skills
- Library Skills
- Coping with Examinations
- Introduction to Degree Subjects.

The RTL also links with student services and the Maynooth University Access Programme. A particularly close relationship has emerged between the RTL and the library, who offer supports to both staff and students.

Students who obtain a minimum overall grade of 60% in the Certificate in RTL are eligible to take up a dedicated space on a Bachelor of Arts degree at Maynooth University.

The RTL is strongly influenced by the philosophies of education associated with the discipline of adult education. Learning is highly participatory, is dialogic and is very hands-on. This fits with the wider vision of the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE), which states:

The key fundamental beliefs underpinning the Department's vision is (i) that education is a human right for everyone throughout their lives and (ii) the purpose of education is to foster people's capacities for agency and transformation. Transformation is understood as the capacity to cope with the

world as it is, to critique and resist injustices and create new egalitarian ways to live (DACE, 2017).

The evolution of the Return to Learning

One of the difficulties in researching the **Certificate in Return to Learning** (RTL) has been tracing its trajectory and evolution. The course has grown organically over many years, responding in ad hoc ways, to the needs of particular groups. The research reports its historical evolution as part of the wider community education movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Fitzsimons, 2017). The RTL has its roots in *The Shanty*, an adult education initiative started in the early 1980s and which has since become part of the work of the organisation An Cosán. It was through collaboration with this organisation and key staff based in what was then St Patrick's College in Maynooth that a university based access programme was initiated and the first programme was rolled-out in 1992. Its early vision was to offer recognition for specific skills and thus define it as a legitimate access route. The certificate in RTL is thus older than the now established pre-dates the Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP), an office that emerged from related activism and links between communities and university staff.

Two associate staff (named core tutors in this report) were responsible for the design and delivery of the RTL, a situation that remains the case to this day. This report captures much positivity and praise for these women and their central role in the lifecycle of the programme. The Head of Continuing Education and an administrator at the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) support these core tutors.

Over the years, Maynooth University has facilitated several outreach programmes, including RTL programmes in a range of off campus settings such as Bray, Co. Wicklow, Wexford and Newbridge. Co. Kildare. Some of these were tailored to suit particular learning groups such as the Soilse Project 'Return to Education for recovering drug-users' (Barter, 2010).

In 2012, the RTL was also delivered from the Maynooth University Kilkenny Campus. While the course format, admission requirements and assessment procedures were similar, there was some variation in the subjects delivered when compared to the RTL programmes delivered at Maynooth University's Kildare campus.

This research references historically significant government policy interventions in Access provision right up to current National policy that is guided by The National Access Plan 2015-

2019. This policy supports increased access and participation within higher education with an emphasis on six main target groups. These are 1) People with disabilities, 2) Mature students, 3) Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, 4) Students progressing from Further Education, 5) part-time students, and 6) Members of the Irish Traveller community. The plan also aims to support participation by sub-groups within target groups, for example those who are lone parents or vulnerable migrants (HEA, 2015: 14)

The RTL is interpreted as one of many access certificates each of which are designed to offer targeted entry to HE for mature students and which fulfil three specific purposes; to introduce prospective students to their subject area, to orientate them to campus life and to provide support in the early development of study and academic skills.

Maynooth University is already a national leader in widening participation. Over 75% of new entrants are from families where neither parent has attained a qualification higher than Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Almost one quarter (24%) of new entrants to Maynooth, (compared to 19% for the university sector), come from non-manual, semi-skilled- and unskilled socio-economic backgrounds. Mature students accounted for 18% of new entrants in 2010/11, compared to 11% for the university sector (NUIM/HEA Compact, 2014: 15/16). The Certificate in RTL offers a vital pathway of entry into university for many mature students who initially apply for undergraduate studies but who are referred to the RTL as a necessary preparatory year. A key referral route for these students is through the work of the Mature Student Officer as part of the wider Maynooth University Access Programme.

About the research

This mixed-methods study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative findings are derived from the contributions of 48 past-students as well as 13 current and past staff who are involved with some aspect of programme delivery. Quantitative research draws from two sources: anonymised student records for the years 2001-2016 (914 students) and voluntary participation in an online survey for past-participants (86 students) representing 11% of the research population.

Research limitations:

- Student records for the RTL are only available since 2001 onwards. This omits 168 students who registered between 1992 and 2000, inclusive.
- Student information on progression only relates to Maynooth University. This means that progression to other HEIs, both private and state provider, is not quantitatively captured.
- The information made available to researchers is not subject specific meaning no information can be analysed on student choices in relation to under-graduate and post-graduate studies.
- Finally, 35 students who were invited to participate in the survey were current students on the RTL (2016-17). Consequently, their responses are excluded from the findings on retention and progression.

An open-coding process was used to analyse qualitative data. The themes that emerged were: Student Motivations, Maynooth Experience, Student Fees, Student Learning Experiences, Progression, and recommendations from research participants. The themes to emerge from staff interviews were - experience of the programme, the value of the RTL, Student challenges and supports, the curriculum and operational issues and recommendations for change.

This research project was undertaken in the context of the Data Protection Act (1988, 2003), and is in line with Maynooth University's Social Science Research Ethical Policies and the ethical research guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association. (BERA, 2011). Ethical approval for the project was sought and granted by Maynooth University's Ethics Committee in December 2016 (Appendix 5), ethical issues are discussed at relevant points throughout this research.

The research was conducted with an awareness of existing power dimensions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, Kincheloe *et al.*, 2011; Noddings, 2012) and is grounded in the ethical practices associated with adult education based around care and respect of all participants.

Quantitative Research Findings on student profile, retention and progression

Student characteristics

Drawing on data provided by MU Student Records (n=914), the following student characteristics were identified:

- Sixty-one percent (61%) of students to register for the RTL are women and 39% are men.
- Student age ranged from 23 years to over 71 years with 75% of all students to register over 30 years of age.

Drawing on data from the student survey alone (n=86):

- Seventy respondents identified as ‘first-time mature students’, three identified as having a disability and nine identified as being a member of a social-economic group with a low participation rate in Higher Education. A further eleven respondents identified as a ‘part-time, flexible learner’ and four held a Further Education Award. The only target population set out in Access policies not represented were members of the Travelling Community.
- Almost half had completed the Leaving Certificate, ten had completed technical or vocational training and eleven had completed a QQI programme (Level 3 to 6). Six respondents reported prior engagement in formal education to primary school level only.

Recruitment, retention and performance within RTL

Drawing on data provided by MU Student Records (n=914),

- The average student intake per annum from 2000-2016 is 54. The highest intake was 94 students who registered in the academic year 2008-2009.
- Sixty-eight per cent (68%) of all RTL students between 2000 and 2016 successfully completed the programme.

Progression and retention post-RTL

From the point of registration, the following can be determined from existing student records:

- Forty-five percent (45%) of all students progress to further study within Maynooth University. This represents 66% of all students who complete the Certificate in Return to Learning.

- Four percent (4%) registered for other certificate studies in Maynooth University.
- Twenty-three percent (23%) of RTL graduates who registered for undergraduate studies did not complete their degree programme.

Postgraduate progression

Drawing on records of students who registered with the RTL programme, we can see that:

- Two hundred and thirty-four (234) RTL students have completed an undergraduate programme, eighty-two (82) of whom completed this course of study at Maynooth University. This represents 35% of those who complete undergraduate studies.
- From this cohort, 65% registered for Masters programmes as their highest registration, 26% registered for a higher diploma and 9% registered for a PhD programme.
- Five RTL students have completed doctoral studies.

Employment status

- From the 86 past-students who completed the online survey, 48% were in employment, 33% were unemployed and 21% were retired.

Whilst these statistics give some insight into characteristics, performance, progression and retention, qualitative findings as detailed within the next two chapters add to the numeric measurement through the insight of participant experiences.

Qualitative findings on Student experiences

The best way to assess the effectiveness of the Certificate in Return to Learning (RTL) is to evaluate the impact on its target audience. Student experiences have been analysed and grouped according to six emerging themes:

1. Student Motivations
2. Maynooth Experience
3. Student Fees
4. Student Learning Experiences
5. Progression
6. Recommendations

Key points to emerge from the qualitative aspect of student experiences are:

- In general terms, past students of the RTL reported extremely positive experiences of the RTL at Maynooth. Most notable was the affection and respect with which participants spoke about the core tutors who students felt were a critical part of their success.
- The adult education methodologies of dialogue, participation, hands-on approaches and student-centeredness that underpin the RTL, offer a much-needed level of support.
- The strength of the peer-group was also cited as fundamental in forming supports that lasted throughout their Maynooth experience.
- The benefits of on campus experience during the RTL were identified as being extremely important, especially for those students who subsequently progressed to undergraduate study within Maynooth.
- Students have mixed experiences and opinions on the issue of fees. Some felt that paying fees actually motivated them to do well while others reported struggling to make ends meet.

- Participants felt that the core skills based curriculum, essay writing, readings skills etc. were a necessary and important part of the successful preparation for undergraduate studies.
- Some students were critical of a lack of subject choice,, in particular, the absence of IT skills. Students felt this needed to be included as a core skill. Some others also felt that they would have liked a science and maths option.
- In general terms, some students felt that they would like more options in terms of subject choices and options for progression. While others believed that the narrow focus of the RTL, in terms of its skills and subjects, is a key strength.
- While some felt that the continuous assessment model was ideal, others, who went on to exam-based undergraduate studies, reported feeling underprepared. More worryingly, some reported deliberately avoiding exam based undergraduate courses post RTL.
- Students would ideally like to see a part time and full-time option.

Staff Experience of the Certificate in Return to Learning

Thirteen staff members participated in semi-structured interviews. While the purpose of the qualitative engagement with students was to get a clear sense of the students experience on the RTL programme, the staff engagement was more operational from a research perspective. The following themes emerged.

- The staff experience of the RTL is overall very positive, and a common perception was that students tended to perform well on the programme. A strong sense of alliance with the Department of Adult and Community Education emerged. This included a belief that the adult education methodologies used were a core feature of the RTL and that students experienced these as transformative.

- Staff spoke particularly highly of the hands-on approach embodied by the two core tutors at the centre of the programme experience. This model was also identified as a weakness as it was creating an over-dependence on key individuals.
- The flexibility of programme delivery was interpreted as a key strength in attracting non-traditional students and the course was interpreted as integral to Maynooth University (MU) mature student intake.
- The benefits of the on campus experience were believed to be strong both for orientation to campus life and to ensure progression.
- Amidst this research, there is some ambiguity about the effectiveness and sustainability of outreach (off campus) RTL programmes. Concerns were raised about these being too subject focused, omitting sufficient space for personal development, and operating from a funding model that was difficult to manage.
- The role of administrators in recruiting for students was acknowledged. Equally, the role of the Disability Office in supporting some students is noted.
- The RTL was also identified as being an important catalyst for the development of the Inclusive Learning Initiative; a university wide initiative that supported students with intellectual disabilities to attend MU as part of the general student population.
- The curriculum was interpreted as incorporating key knowledge and skills relevant to under-graduate studies. Some limitations in subject choices were identified, as well as some dissatisfaction with modes of assessment and an absence of career guidance.

Staff suggestions for change

- Staff experience mirrors student experience in terms of the central role of the core tutors, for example through the comment *“The Tutors have been critical*

to the success of this” and in terms of the on campus experience being an integral part of its success.

- Staff also felt that the adult education methodologies were an intrinsic part of the success of the RTL.
- Some regard fees as a barrier to participation as they are expensive and uncompetitive with other institutions offering similar courses.
- IT Skills were mentioned as lacking on the RTL curriculum.
- A lot of hard work and networking has been done down through the years by the core tutors in terms of student supports. The unique relationships such as that with the library and its LIST skills is one example, and it is felt that it is important that effort is made to maintain these links.
- Some staff were concerned that access routes for business/economics and law were currently not provided and they would like to see this option explored as part of any future reframing or review of the RTL.
- Some staff believe the NFQ level 5 framework should be examined, with many believing that students who successfully complete have the capacity to study at level 7-8. Tutors have in the past contested their level 5 status, but report it was explained to them that it is to invite as many learners as possible at pre-entry level.
- The part time, morning and evening structure has its advantages and disadvantages. It allows flexible access for non-traditional students including access to all students supports. However, it can be difficult for students, especially evening students, to access all services available to them.
- RTL students do not fall under the remit of Maynooth University Access Programme due to their part-time status. In practice, there is a working agreement between RTL tutors and staff in Maynooth University Access Programme that supports students presenting with disabilities etc., but these supports are accessed informally. While some staff were in support of these operational procedures, others asked if the part-time structure was enough to suitably address student needs.
- Some staff members felt that the current operationalisation of the RTL was too reliant on associate staff and should instead be more central to the core activities of the department of Adult and Community Education.

Strengths, impacts and recommendations.

The Certificate in Return to Learning is satisfying national access criteria where the subject choices of potential students fall within Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. The RTL particularly supports those in the mature student category but is less successful in attracting participants from lower-socio economic backgrounds, those with disabilities, migrants, and members of the Irish Traveller community.

Delivery of the Certificate in RTL on campus is believed to be beneficial by all involved. Illuminating this point, this participant tells us,

You're so far ahead when you come into university, you know the library, you know what's expected of you. I'm in third year now and they are still teaching people some of the things we learned on the RTL. (online-survey)

Past-students report largely positive experiences with particular attention paid to praising two core tutors involved in the programme and the adult education methodologies employed. One participant encapsulates this sentiment in the following comment,

I was encouraged, motivated and inspired by the two wonderful [core tutors] who are teaching the course. Their passion for their subjects and dedication to their students was hugely inspiring. (online-survey)

Recommendations for sustainable delivery into the future

1. Position the Foundation Certificate (FC) in Return to Learning within the Maynooth University's strategic vision to broaden participation.

- (a) Ensure staff involved in programme implementation communicate the benefits of participation to the University Executive and other stakeholders.
- (b) Carry out further research into FC access programmes in other universities (such as the Trinity Access Programme) to learn from their capacity to both

promote their programmes to the general public, and fund their programme costs as part of wider university strategy.

2. Continued delivery from within the Department of Adult Education but strengthen relationships with Maynooth University Access Programme and with other Maynooth University Foundation Certificates.

- (a) Continue delivery of the Certificate programme from the Department of Adult and Community Education so as to preserve the particular ethos carried by this department.
- (b) Strengthen connections between this FC, other FCs in Maynooth University namely the *Certificates in Science and Engineering*, the *Think About Teaching* FC and future FC developments.
- (c) Appoint a working group that draws from the Access Office, Department of Adult and Community Education, Science and Engineering and the Turn to Teaching Access programme to oversee strategic development. This could include the development of a companion Access Certificate in Business and Law.

3. Ensure adequate terms and conditions of employment for core tutors responsible for course delivery.

- (a) Create clearer contractual arrangement with future course tutors that would embed this FC as a core activity of the department of Adult and Community Education.
- (b) Ensure those employed are supported to take on a more recognised coordinating and developmental role in the management of the programme.

4. Re-brand and promote the programme across a variety of audiences.

- (a) Rename the Certificate in Return to Learning to an identity that more clearly showcases its purpose. One possibility is to call it the *Foundation Certificate in Arts, Humanities and Social Science*. This offers greater alignment with the existing Foundation Certificate in Science and Engineering and makes it clearer to potential students what progression pathways are open to them.
- (b) Strengthen connections with Further Education Colleges, Community Sector organisations and other civil society organisations working with target groups identified in the National Access Plan 2015-2019. Many of these relationships exist within the Department of Adult and Community Education through its wider work with FE Colleges in particular. Greater linkage to a Foundation Certificate in Arts, Humanities and Social Science would capture those populations specifically identified as a national priority.
- (c) Strengthen connections within other departments in MU for example the department of Applied Social Studies, the Department of English, the Department of Business and Law and the Media Studies department. This could enhance strategic engagement in terms of recruitment as well as programme content.

5. Re-organise course structure, mode of delivery and course fee.

- (a) Re-orientate the programme for full-time delivery and incorporate a blended-learning approach that would retain the potential for students to attend classes for similar hours as the current part-time option. Students would thus be eligible for grant supports.
- (b) Re-classify the certificate from level 5 to level 6. This would maximise progression from the Further Education and Community Education sector. This recommendation is in line with the national strategy on access through its potential to attract Further Education award holders who may already hold a national certificate at level 5.

- (c) Review programme contents to include a greater focus on e-learning and e-technologies and to include the potential for optional preparatory examinations.
- (d) Position the Certificate in RTL in parallel to other MU Foundation Certificate programmes such as the *Certificate in Science and Engineering* and future FC development (for example FCs in business and Law). Students on this programme could share core modules with those attending the FC in Return to Learning.
- (e) Establish an alumni to serve and support past students and nurture the strong sense of community that exists.

Fundamentally, a huge part of the RTL's success is the low-risk opportunity offered to adult learners hoping to take their first tentative steps within third level education. Once they have begun their journey, the concept of university is gradually demystified. This report suggests that adult learners not only require access to higher education, but they also want a choice of subjects that gives them the necessary skills to engage and at the same time enables wider future progression and genuine pathways towards higher education in humanities at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Chapter One – Introduction, the Research Context

1.1 Introduction to chapter

This research uses documentary analysis and interviews to narrate the story of student and staff experiences of the programme, its development within the structures of Maynooth University and within a broader contextual discussion of access programmes in Irish higher education. In addition, quantitative analysis of anonymised student records offers important insights on student progression, retention and completion rates. The quantitative research explores the reach of the certificate in Return to Learning (RTL) documenting its evolution over time, its regional spread and the diversity of students attending the programme. Furthermore, the qualitative elements of documentary analysis achieved through narrative means will complement some of the statistical and numeric data.

Throughout this study, the following research questions are addressed:

1. In what way does the Certificate in Return to Learning satisfy equality of access criteria?
2. What are the key experiences of students on the programme?
3. What are the progression, retention and performance rates at certificate, undergraduate, and postgraduate level?
4. What is the most sustainable model for the Certificate in Return to Learning in the future?

1.2 About the Certificate in Return to Learning

The Certificate in Return to Learning (RTL) is a one-year, university based programme which is accredited by Maynooth University and mapped to the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) at level 5. Historically, the Return to Learning certificate offered a pre-university course in its broadest sense. The logic behind the programme was to offer generic skills useful across a range of courses that was open to all students willing to pay part-time fees, which were sometimes affordable with the support of civil society, and welfare based organisations. Recent, promotional information from the Maynooth University website describe the Certificate in RTL as a stepping stone for those who wish to return to study, but have not studied in a formal way for a number of years. Participants are given an opportunity to sample a number of academic subjects and learn a range of essential skills necessary for academic life, which helps students to make more informed choices when selecting subjects later (DACE, 2017). To draw from the words of one participant,

The RTL course taught me the necessary skills of how to write in an academic way, how to research, have faith and confidence in my ideas and to work as part of a team. Most important of all to ask questions, to stretch my mind and to have fun learning. It also gave me an opportunity to build up a network of friends that would see me through my degree years. (E-interview)

The certificate in RTL attracts adult learners from target populations often named within national policy on Access. To this point, the RTL mostly attracts those who fall within the mature student categorisation; a target population repeatedly identified in the national access policy. The notion of ‘access’ can be difficult to define. A companion research report by Fitzsimons and O’Neill (2015) draws from the writings of O’Reilly (2008: 7-8) to interpret access as a process undertaken to widen participation and completion in Higher Education (HE) for population groups who are under-represented in HE. There has been significant development in access policy and provision in the last twenty years. Fleming et al (2017) capture the impacts of these access opportunities on the lives of the non-traditional students who have benefitted from these policy interventions, something this research also hopes to illuminate.

Entry certificates such as the RTL are common within wider access provision and are best understood as “specially-designed, structured programmes that offer a pathway to certain

Higher Education Institution undergraduate programmes” (Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015: 23). Again, to quote a past-participant of the RTL,

Where I come from people don’t go to university. I never thought I’d get the opportunity (Focus Group).

The certificate in Return to Learning offers all the hallmarks of an access foundation certificate. It specifically targets adult learners who have been away from formal study for a number of years offering them a taste of a range of academic subjects.

This approach seeks to demystify university life and to help adults make informed choices about potential future study. Students who obtain a minimum overall grade of 60% are eligible to take up a dedicated place on a Bachelor of Arts degree at Maynooth University. Speaking about their experience in preparing for college a survey respondent explains,

The RTL was hugely beneficial in preparing me for third level education. I would have struggled to survive first year and would most definitely have dropped out of college. My children have benefited from my experience.

The learning outcomes of the RTL are designed with the above in mind, and are listed as follows:

- Understand the requirements that are necessary for an adult returning to learning in terms of time commitment, discipline and academic standards.
- Understand learning styles, mind maps and timetables.
- Read critically and evaluate arguments, ideas and information from text books and academic resources.
- Demonstrate library and research skills to complete course requirements.
- Adopt the appropriate coping strategies to make a successful transition into full time education.
- Write an essay based on a learning journal.
- Complete a Research Project that meets the scholarly criteria of argument, supporting evidence and structure.

- Use academic and stylistic conventions appropriately and consistently to complete course assessment requirements. (DACE, 2017)

1.2.1 RTL in the context of DACE, MU and the Irish Education Landscape

The certificate in Return to Learning is delivered in keeping with adult education practices. As such, promotional literature stipulates that participants will be expected to,

Engage with group activities and group learning; be willing to learn through dialogue and reflection on experience; and have a level of literacy that is sufficient to complete the assessment requirements. (DACE, 2017)

This approach connects to the wider vision of the Department of Adult and Community Education¹ which states:

The key fundamental beliefs underpinning the Department's vision is (i) that education is a human right for everyone throughout their lives and (ii) the purpose of education is to foster people's capacities for agency and transformation. Transformation is understood as the capacity to cope with the world as it is, to critique and resist injustices and create new egalitarian ways to live.

This departmental aspiration is in line with wider Maynooth university policy which is dedicated to widening participation with a particular emphasis on “first-generation students with no familial background in higher education, and in recruiting mature students” (Maynooth University Strategic Plan, 2012-2017: 10).

The RTL is open to all mature students over the age of 21. Participants need to be 21 years of age or over on 1st January of the year in which the course commences. However, students must be 23 years of age in order to access full-time undergraduate study, on 1st January in year of application.

Although fees for the programme have varied over the years, the fee for the RTL currently stands at €1,000. The issue of fess is discussed in more detail in sections 6.3 and 7.4.1 of this report.

¹ For further information please see, <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/adult-and-community-education/about-us>

In line with common interpretations of access, the right of entry to Higher Education is specifically targeted at under-represented population groups. These target groups are named by *The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education* (National Access Office) within the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as,

- Those who are socially, economically or culturally under-represented in Higher Education.
 - First-time, mature students.
 - Students with a disability.
 - Flexible, part-time learners
 - Irish Travellers.
- (HEA 2015, 34)

1.3 Research methodology and participants

As part of this research, interviews were conducted with those involved in imagining the certificate in RTL, those who brought the course to life and those who are currently working at both management and tutor capacities to ensure its continued delivery. In total thirteen staff members were interviewed. As this is the first-time substantive research has been carried out on this program, the history of the RTL that is presented is largely crafted through insights shared during these interviews with key individuals within Maynooth University (see section 2.3 for information on recruitment and sampling).

Using available student records, researchers contacted all past students from the RTL inviting people to get involved in the research. Those who replied were invited to engage in a number of ways; by completing an on-line survey, by participating in focus groups, or by participating in one-to-one interviews. Twenty-five students participated in four focus groups, twelve students were interviewed one-to-one, nine by tele-interviews and three via email correspondence (e-interviews).

Quantitative research was undertaken using two sources of data. The first of these was through Maynooth University anonymised student records. These were available for the years 2001-

2016 and incorporated access, retention and progression for 914 students who registered for the Certificate in RTL across two university campuses.

The second source of quantitative data was the aforementioned online survey (see appendix 1). This was completed by eighty-six students.

1.4 Research Scope and Limitations

This mixed-methods study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative findings are derived from the contributions of 48 RTL past-students as well as 13 current and past staff involved with some aspect of programme delivery. Quantitative research drew from two sources: anonymised student records for the years 2001-2016 (914 students) and voluntary participation in an online survey for past-participants (86 students) representing 11% of the research population. This research is presented with a number of limitations,

- Student records for the RTL are only available since 2001 onwards. This omits 168 students who registered between 1992 and 2000 inclusive.
- Student information on progression only relates to Maynooth University. This means that progression to other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), both private and state provider, is not quantitatively captured.
- The information made available to researchers is not subject specific, meaning no information can be analysed on student choices in relation to under-graduate and post-graduate studies.
- Finally, 35 students who were invited to participate in the survey were current students on the RTL (2016-17). This excludes their participation in terms of retention and progression statistics.

1.5 Overview of the report

The research is presented over eight distinct chapters. This **opening chapter** introduces the reader to the RTL, details the research methodology used and outlines some limitations of the research.

Chapter two presents the research methodology outlining its objectives, its design, and how the research population were identified and recruited.

Chapter three offers a history of the RTL which is located within a wider history of adult and community education as well as a history of Access provision to Higher Education. Key interviewees involved with the RTL since inception contributed to the historical overview presented.

Chapter four contextualises the Certificate in Return to Learning amidst the wider national landscape of Access provision.

Chapter five relies on the statistical anonymised data from student records and presents information on the student cohort, in terms of age, gender, nationality and previous education achievements. Progression and performance are analysed within the programme, and at undergraduate and postgraduate level within Maynooth University. It also draws quantitatively from an online, anonymised survey that was circulated to all past participants who made contact with the researchers.

Chapters six draws from the qualitative findings from interactions with past-students of the certificate in Return to Learning. Data is drawn from one-to-one interviews, focus-groups and qualitative contributions to the aforementioned online survey.

Chapter seven focuses on findings from interviews carried out with key staff presenting the emergent themes based around their experiences of the RTL programme.

Chapter eight offers a final analysis of the research and makes recommendations for a sustainable model of future delivery of the RTL.

1.5.1 The changing nature of language

One of the challenges in preparing a report that spans such a lengthy timeframe is the changing language that is used to name some of the key staff involved. In particular, two women who were central to course delivery have, at different times been referred to as ‘course tutors’, ‘course coordinators’, and ‘course administrators’. Acknowledging that their roles encapsulated each of these capacities, the report uses the term **core tutors** throughout.

1.5.2 A word on methodology

As little has been recorded to date about the RTL, the history of the certificate programme has been prepared by drawing from research conversations undertaken as part of the study. This means that readers will encounter research participant quotations early on in the report that are presented as separate to chapters six and seven which are dedicated to the reporting of qualitative findings.

Chapter 2 – Research Methodology

2.1 Introduction to chapter

This research was carried out using a mixed-methods approach that comprised of both quantitative and qualitative methods. In keeping with the research aims, the use of combined methods offers a more robust outcome and helps to overcome any specific limitations of each method in isolation. Existing discourse suggest that, “*both paradigms are designed towards understanding*” therefore, when used in combination, there is a greater possibility of “*neutralizing the flaws of one method and strengthening the benefits of the other for better research results*” (Hussein, 2009: 2).

Firstly, a mixed-method online survey was designed and distributed using the *Bristol Online Survey* (BOS) package. In order to facilitate students and staff to contribute qualitatively, each were given the opportunity to participate in a number of ways. This included focus-group participation, one-to-one interviewing, via email (e-interviewing) and telephone interviews (tele-interviewing). These latter two methods were used in situations where it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews for a variety of reasons.

Interviews explored students’ motivations for applying and participating, and their experiences with regards retention and progression. In keeping with the ethos of Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE), narrative inquiry has been used to give depth and to add context to the quantitative data. Within the field of social research, narrative inquiry is commonly credited to the feminist school of research, developed during the late twentieth century. Narrative inquiry has been described as both “*a way of knowing*” and an extension of “*literary theory and ethnography*” (Chataika, 2005: 3).

2.2 Research ethics

This research project was undertaken in the context of the Data Protection Act (1988, 2003), and is in line with Maynooth University's Social Science Research Ethical Policies and the ethical research guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association. (BERA, 2011). Maynooth University's Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the project in December 2016 (appendix 5).

The research was conducted with an awareness of power dimensions at play (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, Kincheloe *et al.*, 2011; Noddings, 2012). This research is grounded in the ethical practices associated with adult education based around care and respect of all participants. Anonymity is maintained for all past-students who participated in the research and care was taken to ensure confidentiality was maintained as much as possible. All data gathered was stored in line with the policies detailed above.

Further ethical dimensions of the study are discussed at relevant points throughout this chapter and the research report more broadly.

2.3 Identification and Recruitment of Staff Cohort

With the support of the research advisory team, some 'key staff' were initially identified who were invited via email, to participate in the research. As the research developed, more staff were identified as being of strategic importance to the research. The staff varied from, tutors on the RTL, support staff including current and past administration, heads of department and staff from the wider university that were instrumental or had been some way involved with the RTL over the years.

2.3.1 Staff Interviews

In total, thirteen staff were invited to participate and all agreed to do so. While the majority of interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, four staff members were interviewed in pairs. Interviews were carried out between December 2016 and April 2017. The staff cohorts are identified by their roles in Table 1.

| | |
|---|------------|
| RTL Tutors | n3 |
| Department heads | n1 |
| Core RTL staff | n3 |
| Administration staff | n2 |
| Access staff | n1 |
| Library staff | n1 |
| Admissions Office staff | n2 |
| Total number of staff participants | n13 |

Table 1 - breakdown of Maynooth University interviewees

When engaging with staff stakeholders the research principally inquired into experience and knowledge relating to the evolution of the RTL, and the value, challenges and opportunities facing the RTL.

2.4 Identification and recruitment of Student Cohort

The Student Cohort for qualitative research were identified from two sources of anonymised data:

1. Anonymised student records for the years 2001-2017 inclusive.
2. Student records of past-participant's home address which were held internal to the Department of Adult and Community Education.

2.4.1 Anonymised Student records for quantitative analysis.

Maynooth university student records were available to researchers for the years 2001-2017 inclusive. This amounted to n914 students who registered across all locations; both on campus and in outreach centres, where the Certificate in Return to Learning was offered. The information provided related to student's age at registration, their gender, whether they completed the programme, and whether progressed to further education within Maynooth

University. Progression rates recorded, incorporate performance at both graduate and undergraduate level.

2.4.2. Student records to recruit participants for qualitative involvement

In addition to the anonymised data-set provided by the Student records office, records were also held internal to the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE). This data-set related to current and past-students who were only registered at Maynooth University's main campus in Co. Kildare.

Building on the goodwill generated through the actions of the core tutors responsible for delivering the Certificate in Return to Learning (RTL), core tutors co-wrote an initial introductory letter for this research, as the researchers believed this would initiate a better response from students (see appendix 3). This letter was then posted to a total of n905 Students. Each student was only contacted once. Twenty-nine letters were returned to sender as the past-students were no longer at the addresses held by the university. A further n6 past-students were identified as deceased through student records. This reduces the total research population reach to n870.

As a result of this mail-out, 83 email responses and 9 phone enquiries were received totalling 92 expressions of interest in research participation. This represents 11% of the research population. Each of these 92 students received both the online survey and an invitation to participate in a focus group (see appendix 4).

2.4.3. Past Student Online Questionnaire

As mentioned above, 92 past-students who made contact with the researchers were invited to complete an anonymous, on-line survey questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather data unavailable through anonymised student records. Questions asked related to motivation for doing the Certificate in Return to Learning, previous levels of education, whether or not participants identify with the target groups for access as identified in the National Plan for Access 2015-2019, diversity, employment and, finally, their thoughts on whether the Certificate in RTL is best suited to full-time or part-time delivery.

2.4.4. Past Student Focus Groups

Focus groups made up of past-students were held in Maynooth University in March 2017. Four focus groups took place over two days, with a total number of n25 participants. These semi-structured interview questions added further context to the online survey which many focus group participants had already completed. In general, the questions asked at focus group encounters inquired into student experience, what worked well or didn't work well and any suggestions about how the certificate in RTL could be improved.

2.4.5 Student Interviews

Although the researchers had not initially planned to carry out one-to-one interviews with former RTL students, many expressed a preference for an alternative to focus-group participation. In order to accommodate as many as possible and out of duty of care, n9 tele-interviews and n3 e-mail interviews (e-interviews) were carried out.

2.4.6 Summary of research participation

Overall participation is illustrated in the following graph;

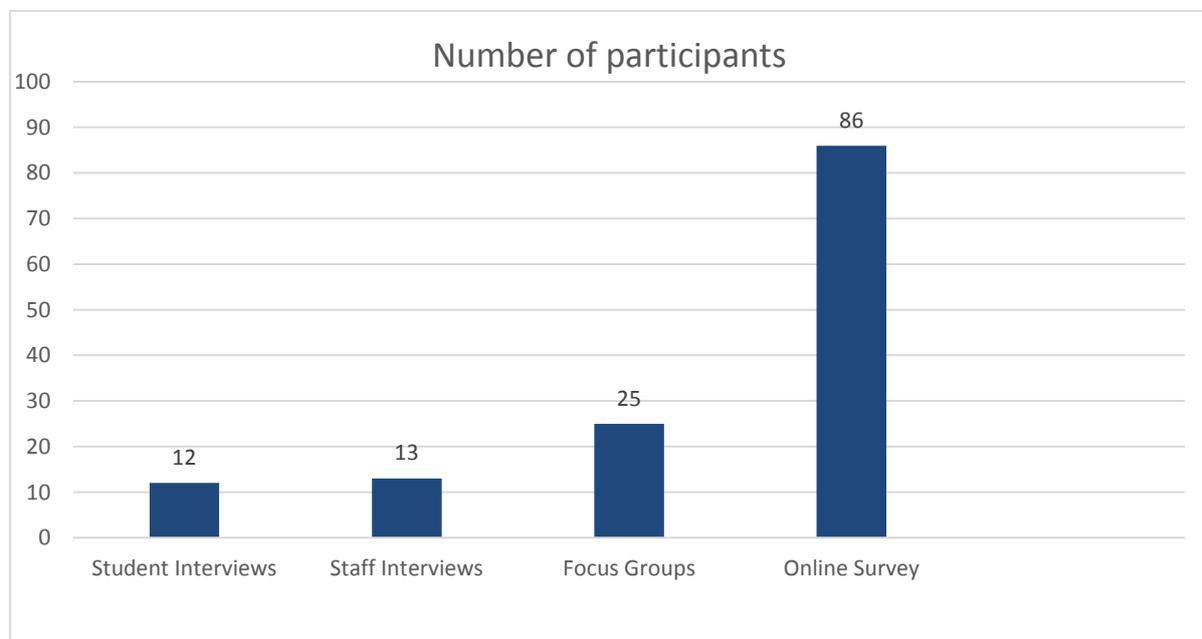


Figure 1 overall participation in research

2.5 Research analysis

Throughout each phase of qualitative research, the questions asked, and the topics explored were informed by the broader research objectives and research questions (see chapter 1). As with the companion research carried out on the Maynooth University Certificate in Science and Engineering (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015), the researchers worked from an adult education perspective that acknowledges participant knowledge and expertise and gives weight to staff and student recommendations.

The semi-structured questions posed throughout the various modes of qualitative research were informed by the broader research objectives and research questions. In particular, the qualitative research explored pathways into the RTL, social and learning experiences on the programme; and post-RTL experiences and destinations.

When analysing data, an open-coding process was employed. Themes that emerged from this process were:

1. Student Motivations
2. Maynooth Experience
3. Student fees
4. Student Learning Experiences
5. Progression
6. Recommendations

The themes emerging from the staff data were:

1. Experience of the programme
2. The value of the RTL
3. Student challenges and supports
4. Curriculum Operational issues for RTL
5. Staff recommendations for RTL
6. Suggestions for change

2.6 Summary of chapter

This chapter provides the reader with information on research design, and on data gathered both through anonymised student records made available by the host university and through self-selection from past-students who registered for the Certificate in Return to Learning. The core themes to emerge have been named, these will be explored in more detail in chapters six (for students) and chapter seven (for staff). Before this, a history of the evolution of the RTL will be presented.

Chapter 3 – The Evolution of the Return to Learning

This chapter offers a history of the Certificate in Return to Learning (RTL) locating its history within a wider community education movement of the 1980s and 1990s (Fitzsimons, 2017). It also describes its transition into the university and offers the reader information on its current structure and focus.

One of the difficulties in researching the **Certificate in Return to Learning** (RTL) has been tracing its trajectory and evolution. The course has grown organically over many years, responding in ad hoc ways, to the needs of particular groups. This has meant that virtually nothing has been documented or written about it until now. As this research has progressed, the difficulties in tracing the operational structures have become less important than the inspirational and transformative narrative of former RTL students and its hugely supportive staff. This chapter relies heavily on the narratives of staff including an interview with the programme's founder. The information supplied by this key staff member, traces the RTL's evolution from its early beginnings, in the women's community education and social justice movement of the late 1980s. It also relies on interviews with current staff members including the Head of Continuing Education within the Department of Adult Education at Maynooth University and other key staff involved in the programme's delivery.

3.1. Historical Evolution of the Return to Learning Certificate Programme

This section details the early emergence of the Certificate in RTL from the perspective of both its community roots and its development within the university. Some key changes along the way are detailed.

3.1.1 Early emergence in local communities

The RTL has its roots in *The Shanty*, an adult education initiative started in the early 1980s by Dr Katherine Zappone and Dr Anne Louise Gilligan², each of whom have a background in social justice and women's rights activism. This early initiative was run in a room off their home with participants drawn from surrounding communities that were considered 'disadvantaged'. As recalled by one interviewee, "*they bussed women in from nearby Tallaght and in the early years, there was a focus on meditation and stillness*". Although not a participant in this research, some insight can be drawn from an interview with Katherine Zappone, which was published in The Irish Times in 2012. Zappone states that, while teaching liberation theology in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), she and Dr Gilligan spoke about:

Starting a project for women who hadn't had educational opportunities. We bought our home, The Shanty, converted the garage on the property and went to the local parish, said we wanted to start adult education courses. We've just celebrated the 25th anniversary of what's now called An Cosán (O'Rourke, 2012)

Responding to the needs of its patrons, The Shanty evolved over the years and developed an interest in the fields of childcare and community development. As both demand and popularity grew, its pioneers secured funding which led to the development and building of An Cosán³. An Cosán houses three operations in its present form: ***The Shanty Education and Training Centre***, an adult education centre, ***Fledglings***, a social enterprise centre and ***Rainbow House***, an early childhood education and care facility.

The Shanty didn't emerge in a vacuum rather was part of a wider community education movement that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Community education can be difficult to define but is usually thought about as an approach to education that is characterised by certain principles. Community educators believe that people come into a learning space with existing knowledge, values and experiences. Rather than stifle these through teacher-talk and an overly prescribed curriculum, learner insight and lived experience is interpreted as a legitimate form of knowledge that is often under-appreciated in today's society (Connolly, 2008; Fitzsimons, 2017). Typically, community education works with certain population groups. These include people who have left school early, people from communities that are considered socio-economically disadvantaged, Travellers, people parenting alone and other people who have

² Katherine Zappone and Anne Louise Gilligan are both well known in Ireland for their pioneering work in advancing a range of social justice based initiatives across Ireland. Dr Zappone is currently a government minister with responsibility for Children and Youth Affairs.

³ An Cosán, takes its meaning from the Irish word, 'The Path'.

experienced inequality in their lives. These population groups mirror those that many tailored Access programmes work with making the two activities comfortable bedfellows.

In the Mid 1980s Maynooth University (then part of St Patrick's College) was in contact with The Shanty about awarding certificates for some of their programmes. Key staff, both academic and administrative, worked very closely with An Cosán, an action that embodied an activist policy off campus. In a recent interview about the emergence of adult and community education in Ireland, the then Director of AONTAS (the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation) described the Centre for Adult and Community Education, Maynooth, as being,

At the forefront of the accreditation for community education...with Extra Mural Certificates available for the classes I conducted in Women's Studies which launched me on my path in 1985. I started in Tallaght with the group which subsequently went on to establish The Shanty and An Cosán with Anne Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone. (Connolly, 2016)

As adult and community education in Ireland grew, its participants and organisers encouraged a shift from doing courses for enjoyment toward a greater emphasis on recognition for people's achievements through certification (Kelly, 1994). By way of validating community-based learning, programmes that began as attendance only were awarded credits from partner Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). By the mid-1990s, adult education courses became about progression, something those within the Shanty encouraged. One interviewee explains how "*Shanty were very keen in developing access for Adults and in particular the skills needed for third level education*". This coincided with an influx in European funding such as through the Poverty 1 and Poverty 2 programmes, and there was a very strong move towards enabling disadvantaged adults to be able to access education.

3.1.2 Early emergence in the University

As is typical of adult education approaches, those at the coalface of delivery often draw from their own experiences as adult learners. In the case of the Certification in Return to Learning, the course founder, speaks about her own experience as an undergraduate student at Maynooth. She recalls, "*Maynooth was one of the first Irish universities to take in adult learners*" continuing [for some] the "*jump was too big for them [...], they felt disadvantaged*". This experience gave the course founder, an ideal perspective to understand what skills were needed for adults to "*make the jump*" from further education to higher education.

With the support of registrars at St Patrick's College (now Maynooth University), the RTL was designed to offer recognition for specific skills and thus define it as a legitimate access route. Although there were already small numbers of mature students in Maynooth in the late 1980s and early 1990s, these were generally people with cultural capital, in other words, they had already attained the educational entry requirements of the University. Mostly they were in a position to pay fees and, those interviewed as part of this research recall how few if any, were from typical notions of a disadvantaged community namely, areas characterised by high unemployment, disproportionate one-parent households, and high rates of poverty.

The roles of Access and Mature Student Officer; which are now standard in most universities, grew out of this activist policy and the work done in supporting adult learners at Maynooth. As recounted by the course founder,

In the early years, continuing education was on the margins, there was no access officer, no mature students officer, both those posts came out of here, they came out of us looking for funding to support our adult learners. All these things happened here and later became mainstream.

Another aspect of the RTL's evolution was the tenacity of staff to circumvent usual structures and access funding for some students by individualised appeals within local government structures. One example might be funding from community and voluntary sector organisations themselves, or through welfare provision.

3.1.3 The appointment of key staff

In the early 1990s, one of the current core tutors on the RTL approached the then Head of Continuing Education within the Department of Adult and Community Education about the possibility of working with adults. Having just finished her masters, she had her own experience of adult education, and wanted to do something to help. This coincided with the course founders' plans to run the RTL on campus and the meeting led to the inception and setting up of the RTL certificate which opened its doors to students in 1992. When discussing the formation of the course, the course founder stated:

I'd love to tell you we all sat down and there was some strategic planning, but that's not the way it happened. The curriculum evolved, in response to students, when and where they popped up, we were very blessed as [core tutors] were very passionate.

From this point forward, two associate staff members become central to the design and delivery of the RTL, a situation that remains the case to this day. These women act as both core tutors,

coordinators to the programme as well as taking on other administrative duties pertinent to this certificate programme. Both have a long history with the course with the first of them starting at its inception in 1992 and the second coming on board, first as a part time tutor in 1995, and then as a key member of the team in 1996. These women, are acknowledged, by staff and students, as being an intrinsic part of the success of the RTL. One staff member confirms this by noting,

The magic of it [RTL] is the women who deliver it, they have a fantastic track record of huge enthusiasm for teaching and learning, and have a model of education that I think is unique to them. They also are hugely supportive of the students and care for them very, very, well.

Another staff member spoke about their ability to reach adults who have been out of education,

They are brilliant at teaching adults, and people out of education, and they provide so much encouragement to them and give them the confidence to go on, to the detriment of themselves I am sure. They are so self-effacing and may not see the amazing impact they have had on students

The central positioning of these women was not only emphasised by staff involved with the Department of Adult and Community but was echoed by past-students as illustrated by the comment below, and further expanded on later in this report.

They have a natural ability to engage with people on a psychological level, they draw out and encourage people's capacity. They really care, and they brought their own experience of being mature students.

3.2 The current context; operationalisation of the RTL.

At present, there are three tutors involved in the RTL, two core tutors who coordinate the course and a third tutor who delivers a complimentary Data module, and works a shorter number of flexible hours. The programme is delivered through the continuing education section of Maynooth University's Adult Education Department, which employs a manager (Continuing Education Coordinator) and an administrator.

As detailed within chapter one, the certificate in Return to Learning (RTL) offers a stepping stone, or preparatory course, that provides mature students, who haven't previously had the chance to go to university, with access to third level education.

3.2.1 Spreading the word about the RTL

Throughout research conversations, one theme to emerge was of the impact of personal contacts and grass-roots communications in attracting adult learners to the Certificate in RTL. In promoting the programme, students initially learn about the course via a range of contact points including:

- Information sessions/ Open days
- CAO applications
- Staff recommendations,
- Online advertising
- Word of mouth
- Referrals from the Admissions Office,
- Referrals from Maynooth University Access Programme
- Referrals from the Department of Social Protection.

The Continuing Education officer and the Administration staff do much of the promotional work for the RTL. Alongside this, the Mature Student and Admissions officer deliver information session, giving information to prospective students on course options, subject choices etc. and the various supports. In particular, the Mature Student Officer within MAP refers many students to the Certificate in RTL who are unsuccessful in their initial application for undergraduate studies.

3.2.2 Student selection

Whichever way a potential student finds out about the Certificate in Return to Learning, a key part of their journey involves a phone-call with one of the administrative team within the Department of Adult and Community Education. This key intervention supports students in deciding whether to proceed with their application process. Sometimes those who get in touch do so as a result of internal referrals systems described by one staff research participant as follows:

We have a very good selection process, in that we interview applicants and if they have been out of education for a long time, we recommend a preparatory course. A lot of the time we would refer them to the RTL, and people who may just ring up, would be told about RTL

3.3 Current course Structure and location

The RTL Certificate is a part-time, one-year course which runs over two semesters and comprises a total of 100 hours contact time. The RTL operates over a three-day week, with three student cohorts, operating Monday and Wednesday mornings 10am-12pm, Wednesday and Friday Mornings 10am-12pm and a Wednesday evening group 6pm -10pm. This structure essentially offers students the choice of Monday-Wednesday daytime classes, Wednesday to Friday daytime classes or evening classes. Prospective students may choose which option best suits them, depending on their own circumstances and commitments. The morning and evening groups are then split in half, and the tutors rotate the groups, so that each group can spend time with each tutor. The modules essentially comprise of a range of skills needed to negotiate undergraduate studies and are taught mostly through English literature and classical studies.

Crucially, students who obtain a final grade of 60% or above are automatically offered a place on the Bachelor of Arts degree programme in Maynooth University.

The current modules offered to students (2016-2017) are:

- Module 1: Motivation and Goals
- Module 2: Taking Notes
- Module 3: Writing Skills
- Module 4: Reading Skills
- Module 5: Library Skills
- Module 6: Coping with Examinations
- Module 7: Introduction to Degree Subjects

In terms of operations, the RTL, like many other courses over the years, has been delivered in different locations within the Maynooth University campus. As stated by one staff member “*we were always in strange places, that’s for sure*”. Since 2016, the RTL course has operated out

of the School of Education. This building also houses the Froebel Teacher Training College, the Department of Education, the Department of Adult and Community Education and The Centre for Teaching & Learning.

3.3.1. Evolution of Services for RTL Students

In terms of student access to resources, Student Services, Access Office, Library etc. it should be noted that RTL students did not have proper access until 2001, when they were first officially registered as students of Maynooth University. Prior to 2001, students could not use the library, borrow books or access other essential learning resources. A lot of work was done by the then Teaching and Learning Support Librarian who, according to core tutors, was “*instrumental*” in gaining library rights for RTL students. One aspect of her role involved delivering training supports for groups with non-traditional access to the library, which included RTL students. In interview, the former Teaching and Learning Support Librarian remarked that before 2001, the RTL students “*were in an academic environment, but without academic resources*”. She worked in close consultation with the RTL core tutors, who she says were “*always really keen to learn*”.

The first step was to get students registered, the second was to get them into the library and supported to use it. This period (post 2001) marked the beginning of the library skills sessions for RTL students.

The former Teaching and Learning Support Librarian designed a series of Library Information and Skills Tutorials (LIST), which she later developed into online tutorials, designed to run alongside the information sessions held in the library. The LIST sessions are targeted at all students, who can avail “*at their point of need, regardless of stage or discipline*” (Maynooth University Library, 2017). These information sessions and online resources cover topics such as: What is research? How to avoid Plagiarism and Library Navigation, providing essential insights and training for all students.

Initially, the RTL students received one LIST session per year, however, one research participant explains how there was “*no follow up or way of gauging its usefulness*”. The former Teaching and Learning Support Librarian noted that the core staff of the RTL always attended these sessions (which is not the norm across most courses) and she felt that this really helped

students to see that their training was a “*joint effort*” and “*not only the responsibility of the library*”. Speaking about the access issues faced by RTL students, she commented that,

The first major step was getting access for students to use the library, borrow books etc. The second important step was organising follow up sessions, which now run three times a year.

She went on to say that “*it really grew out of their [core staff] commitment. I have never met staff like them. I think it is really important that the department sees the work that they do*”.

The former Teaching and Learning Support Librarian has since moved to a Senior Library Assistant post and is no longer responsible for LIST.

The part-time structure also means that RTL students are not entitled to avail of some other essential services the university offers to full time students, such as the services of MAP. The Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) don't strictly adhere to this and have in the past supported RTL students. The part-time structure of the RTL can also affect a person's social welfare entitlements, as often, if they pursue a course they are likely to be deemed ineligible for Job Seekers Allowance and other benefits. Thus, the part time structure, while remaining flexible for mature students, does bring with it some negative aspects in terms of the provision of services. Current government policy which prohibits state grant aid for part-time undergraduate studies further compound these difficulties.

3.4 Outreach and off campus delivery

Over the years, Maynooth University has facilitated several outreach programmes, including RTL programmes in a range of off campus settings such as Bray, Co. Wicklow, Wexford and Newbridge. Co. Kildare. Some of these were tailored to suit particular learning groups such as the Soilse Project ‘Return to Education for recovering drug-users’ (Barter, 2010).

The Certificate in RTL was also delivered for a period from the Maynooth University Kilkenny Campus. In 2012 a Level 5 RTL Certificate was delivered at the Maynooth University Kilkenny

Campus⁴ for the first time, in conjunction with the Kilkenny and Carlow Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Alongside other undergraduate programmes, the course ran from September to May on a two-day week basis: Wednesdays (10am-1pm) and Thursdays (10am-12pm). While the course format, admission requirements and assessment procedures were similar, there was some variation in the subjects delivered when compared to the RTL programmes delivered at Maynooth University

The RTL Certificate at the Kilkenny campus had three core subjects that were subject to assessment: Study Skills, History & Tourism and Heritage & Community Development. Modules included:

- Motivation and Goals
- Taking Notes
- Writing Skills
- Reading Skills
- Library Skills
- Introduction to Certificate (Level 7) and Degree (Level 8) subjects.

Again, those who achieved 60% or more were offered a place on a Maynooth University, Arts-based degree, MH101. As detailed earlier in this study, some of these undergraduate entrants will have previously applied for MH101 studies but were referred to the Certificate in RTL by MAP.

3.5 Current Course Fee

The current cost to the student for the RTL is €1,000. There are no reductions on this fee. This makes the RTL possibly the most expensive course of its type. Some comparisons uncovered as part of this research are:

⁴ The Maynooth University Kilkenny Campus has been offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses for students from Kilkenny and the south east since 1997.

1. *Trinity Access Programme (TAP) Foundation Certificate for Mature Students*. This full-time programme runs throughout the academic year and is free of charge. (TCD, 2017)
2. University College Dublin (UCD) Lifelong learning Access Programme, called *Access to Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and Law*. This part-time Foundation Certificate costs €850. UCD also offer a scholarship for those in receipt of certain social welfare payments (for example disability or lone parent status). Those who qualify can access the programme at a reduced scholarship fee of €425 (UCD, 2017).
3. University of Limerick Mature Student Access Certificate. This programme is delivered at a cost of €500. Applicants in receipt of social welfare payments can apply for a reduced fee of €100. The programme also supports applicants who are eligible for the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and advise potential students to link with the Department of Social Protection to inquire into eligibility (UL, 2017).
4. In Maynooth University, the Certificate in Science and Engineering has a fee of €900 but is free to participants who are eligible for the state granted Back to Education Allowance.

3.6 Summary of chapter

This chapter has presented the origins of the Certificate in Return to Learning as amidst a wider social movement of community education which evolved across Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s. Although initially community-based, the research has drawn out its organic transition into the university. Key staff are identified as significant in driving this transition; both staff based within the university with strong community connections, and those subsequently employed to coordinate the RTL. This latter cohort have been particularly influential in ensuring the ongoing success of the RTL, a course that has grown into an important aspect of the Maynooth University Access landscape.

Outreach provision has been documented although there are gaps in student records to record these programmes holistically.

An overview of the current course structure has also been presented, thus providing a bridge between historical evolution and the structure of the course at present.

Chapter Four, will contextualise the RTL amidst this wider national Access provision.

Chapter 4 – Access policy and provision in Ireland

This chapter contextualises the Certificate in RTL within the wider scope of university based access to Higher Education (HE) for non-traditional students. Reviewing the Access landscape involves a review of key policy documents as well as identification of other similar programmes including other certificates offered at Maynooth University (MU).

4.1 The wider access context

In education, the term ‘access’, typically refers to the ways in which institutions and policy strive to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds, including the socially and economically excluded, have an equal opportunity to participate in higher education. Barriers to education can include, geographical location, family income, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age and disability and can often affect a student’s ability to access educational opportunities.

Other wider Higher Education (HE) policy documents have committed their support to access namely the *Higher Education Authority Act* (1971), the *Universities Act* (1997), and the *White Paper: Charting our Education Future* (1995). These policies each encourage focussed support programmes within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which are most commonly implemented through specialist Access Offices. In 1996, fees for the public provision of HE were abolished nationally in an attempt to widen access beyond traditional attendees and further financial barriers have been addressed through student grant schemes which are now governed by the *Student Support Act* (2011). Other key government actions were the ring-fencing of a budget for access in the *National Development Plan* (NDP) 2000-2006 and in 2003, The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (National Access Office) was opened within the Higher Education Authority (HEA) with responsibility for managing access-related funding, developing national plans on access, and engaging with HE providers.

A number of policy papers have been produced by the HEA including *Achieving equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland Action Plan 2005-2007*, *Evaluation of Access Programmes* (2006), *External Audit of Equal Access Survey* (2010). The *National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013* (HEA, 2008) introduced specific initiatives to the access landscape such as an extension of the Disability Access Route to

Education (DARE) scheme which supports students with disabilities, and the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) which supports students from backgrounds considered socio-economically disadvantaged. Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2015: 26) note:

Whilst DARE/HEAR have strengthened and somewhat standardised access, some difficulties in implementation were documented within an HEA external audit (HEA, 2010a). Furthermore, an evaluation of DARE/HEAR undertaken for Maynooth University...noted difficulties that can emerge as a result of varying approaches across HEIs.

Current National Policy on Access is guided by *The National Access Plan 2015-2019*. The aim of this national policy is detailed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as:

The aim of the plan is to support increased access and participation in higher education by six main target groups:

- *People with disabilities*
- *Mature students*
- *Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds*
- *Students progressing from Further Education*
- *Part-time students*
- *Members of the Irish Traveller community*

The plan also aims to support participation by sub-groups within target groups, for example those who are lone parents or vulnerable migrants (HEA, 2015: 14)

The National Access Plan's stated objective is,

of achieving equity of access to higher education is rooted in principles of equality and social inclusion and has been a longstanding national policy priority. Access to higher education should be available to individuals independent of socio-economic disadvantage, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances. (HEA, 2015: 14)

Although mature student entry has been a government priority since, 2005, the current plan sets out specific targets which are relevant to the work of the RTL. It states,

reflecting the increasing importance of part-time and flexible learning opportunities for mature students and the decrease in the numbers of those seeking fulltime options, we have also set a national target for combined full-time and part-time participation. Part-time/flexible participation in higher education is defined as participation that leads to less than 60 credits per academic year. In numerical terms, these target percentage figures represent an increase of approximately 3,500 mature student entrants (full and part-time/flexible) over the next five years. (HEA, 2015: 35)

4.1.1 Access Certificates

Broadly speaking, access certificates are designed to offer targeted entry to HE for mature students. Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2015) identify three specific purposes of these certificates:

- To introduce prospective students to their subject area.
- To orientate them to campus life.
- To provide support in early development of study and academic skills.

Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2015) reviewed one such certificate program, the Maynooth University *Foundation Certificates (FCs) in Science and Engineering* which, at the time of the research, was coordinated by Maynooth University Access Programme at Maynooth University and delivered within the Faculty of Science and Engineering. Their report locates these FCs within a wider landscape of FCs delivered by 17 HEIs across Ireland and targeting a range of non-traditional students including, young adults, mature students, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities. Fitzsimons and O'Neill draw from the work of Murphy (2009) who identified three modes of delivery for FCs:

- Programmes delivered in partnership with Further Education (FE).
- Programmes delivered in partnership across Higher Education (HE) providers.
- Programmes delivered by individual HE providers alone.

The RTL operates as the third model, the most dominant model of delivery across all HEIs (Murphy, 2009). The diverse landscape of access course provision that is developing across the HE sector nationally.

- The different models of practice currently delivered across HE institutions.
- The current policy and funding context within which access/foundation courses operate.

- The range of access, transfer and progression opportunities and their relationship with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Murphy (2009: 13-14) is positive about the unique contributions of FCs however also identifies key areas for future development. These are the potential for Foundation Certificates to offer broader insight into barriers for participation, further collaboration across HEIs and Further Education (FE) colleges, and a national awareness campaign to further illuminate the importance of specialist access routes.

4.2 Access at Maynooth University

The Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2012-17 commits the university to,

sustain our success in widening participation in higher education, strengthening access programmes, responding to new needs, ensuring an inclusive curriculum, and mainstreaming and integrating our supports for student success”. (NUIM, 2012; 19)

Maynooth University is already a national leader in widening participation. Over 75% of new entrants are from families where neither parent has attained a qualification higher than Level 6 on the national framework of Qualifications. Almost one quarter (24%) of new entrants to Maynooth, compared to 19% for the university sector, come from non-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic backgrounds. Mature students accounted for 18% of new entrants in 2010/11, compared to 11% for the university sector. (NUIM/HEA Compact, 2014: 15/16)

4.2.1 Mature Student entry route

Most mature students enter Maynooth University programmes through mainstream mature student entry routes. For full-time programmes, applicants must be 23 years or over. For part-time programmes, applicants must be 21 years or over. Mature student applicants are evaluated on a holistic evaluation of academic, life and work experience, although many programmes have specific criteria for admission. Mature student applicants apply through the CAO system.

Each programme at Maynooth University has spaces reserved for mature student applicants. On average, 200 mature students enrol on Maynooth University programmes and it is university policy to reserve 15% of first-year undergraduate programme places for mature student applicants.

There is an extensive array of online and campus-based resources to support mature students through the various stages of applying and studying at Maynooth. These include: a designated mature student team working from the MAP offices; pre-application guidance; orientation programmes; a comprehensive mature student handbook; mature student society; and a range of other academic, social and counselling services which mature students are directed towards.

4.2.2 DARE and HEAR at Maynooth University

Maynooth University Access Programme works towards widening participation for students with disabilities and students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds through the provision of its Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) structures, processes and programmes. Unlike the FC programme, DARE and HEAR are initiatives which focus on direct entry to undergraduate studies. The FC programme is a preparatory course which may, on successful completion, lead to further study at the university.

The DARE programme guarantees qualifying students that the university will: reserve a quota of reduced-point places on all courses; assign them a dedicated Disability Advisor; provide access to innovative learning support programmes and Assistive Technology Centre; offer supports appropriate to the needs of individual students.

The HEAR programme guarantees qualifying students that the university will: reserve a quota of reduced-point places on all courses; provide financial support throughout their degree for some; and give them access to a designated student advisor (Maynooth Access Programme, 2014).

A minimum of 5.5% of first-year intake is reserved for students entering the university through DARE and HEAR routes respectively.

In addition to the FCs, DARE and HEAR programmes and processes, Maynooth University Access Programme offers a wide range of initiatives and support mechanisms designed to widen HE participation for prospective and current students.

4.2.3 The Foundation Certificate in Science and Engineering

This aforementioned Foundation Certificate programme is now delivered within the Faculty of Science and Engineering at Maynooth University. This is one of the university's three faculties the other two being Humanities and Social Sciences. It is comprised of eight academic departments and four research institutes. The eight departments within the faculty are: Biology; Chemistry; Computer Science; Electronic Engineering; Experimental Physics; Mathematical Physics; Mathematics and Statistics; and Psychology. There are a number of Faculty staff associated, to varying degrees, with the FC programme. However, the Faculty staff who are most centrally involved in the management and coordination of the FC on an ongoing basis are the Dean of Science, who has overall responsibility for the academic aspects of the programme, and the FC Coordinator, a member of the Faculty's academic staff, who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the FC. Relevant Departmental Heads are involved with the programme, if at more distance, in tutor selection and in the various curricular design and academic standard processes associated with the programme.

The research report (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015) identifies the aims of the FC programmes for Science and Engineering as:

- To reintroduce adults to study and learning and to give them the background they will need to embark on a course for a degree in science or engineering;
- To provide an access route for students who wish to take science or engineering when their secondary education did not offer the necessary subjects.

4.3 Summary of chapter

This chapter offered a brief overview of access provision in Ireland. It details chosen government policy and organisational provision through the National Access Office. This has assisted in standardising practice to the benefit of recipients most notably through DEAR/HEAR pathways. By way of comparison, the operationalisation of the Maynooth University FC in Science is presented.

Chapter 5 – Student profile, retention and progression

The purpose of this chapter is to set out quantitative findings on student profile, registration, retention and progression from the Certificate in Return to Learning (RTL).

Quantitative analysis is derived from two sources:

1. An anonymous, on-line survey, which was circulated to all students who agreed to take part in the research (section 2.4.3).

This survey was completed by 86 students (see Appendix 1) representing 11% of the research population.

2. Anonymised Maynooth university student records, which are available for the years 2001-2017 inclusive. Ethical approval was permitted on the grounds that all data provided was anonymised with all personal identifiers removed. Datasets were supplied within password protected excel worksheets.

As findings from these two sources are used, the reader will be informed which source quantification is drawn from. Limitations to quantitative research are in section 1.3.

5.1 Participant profile of RTL students.

This section reports on the participant profile, motivation and progression of RTL students.

5.1.1 Student characteristics.

Student records on gender demonstrate a majority of 61% of students are women with 39% male.



Figure 2 - Gender profile of RTL students

This differs considerably from the Maynooth University Foundation Certificate in Science and Engineering where 72% are male and 28% female. This gender imbalance is not unexpected as research elsewhere indicates women are more likely to study within humanities, arts and social sciences (HEA, 2010: 17).

The most likely age range for RTL students is 41-50 years (26%). Again this differs from Maynooth University’s other access certificate where 60% of all students were within the age category of 23-32 years. Seven percent (n61) are 61 years or over with 1% (n7) over 71 years when they registered for the course.

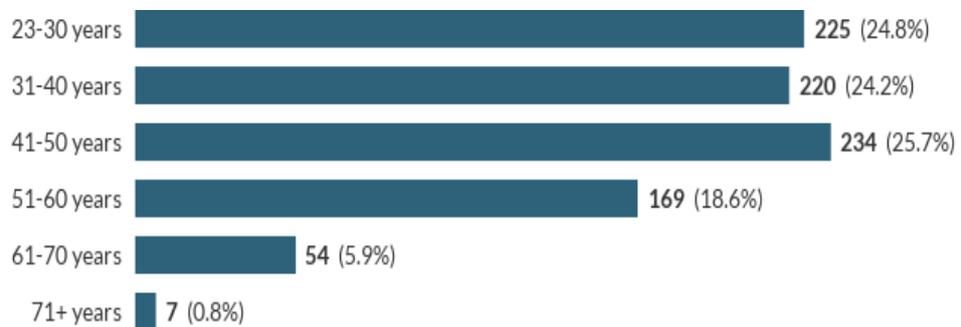


Figure 3 - Age range of RTL students 2001-2016

Whilst these statistics are drawn from the student cohort of n872 registered between 2001-2016, quantitative analysis from the opt-in, online anonymous survey (appendix 1) enabled us to extend our knowledge on student characteristics to include information on their target population as defined by the National Access Plan 2015-2019, their migrant/non-migrant status, and their motivation for completing the RTL certificate. These figures draw from an 11% sample of RTL participants.

The survey asked respondents *“The National Access Plan 2015-2019 identifies five target groups they hope to support in accessing Higher Education: Please indicate if any of the plan's descriptions match how you think about your own circumstances”*. The following emerges:

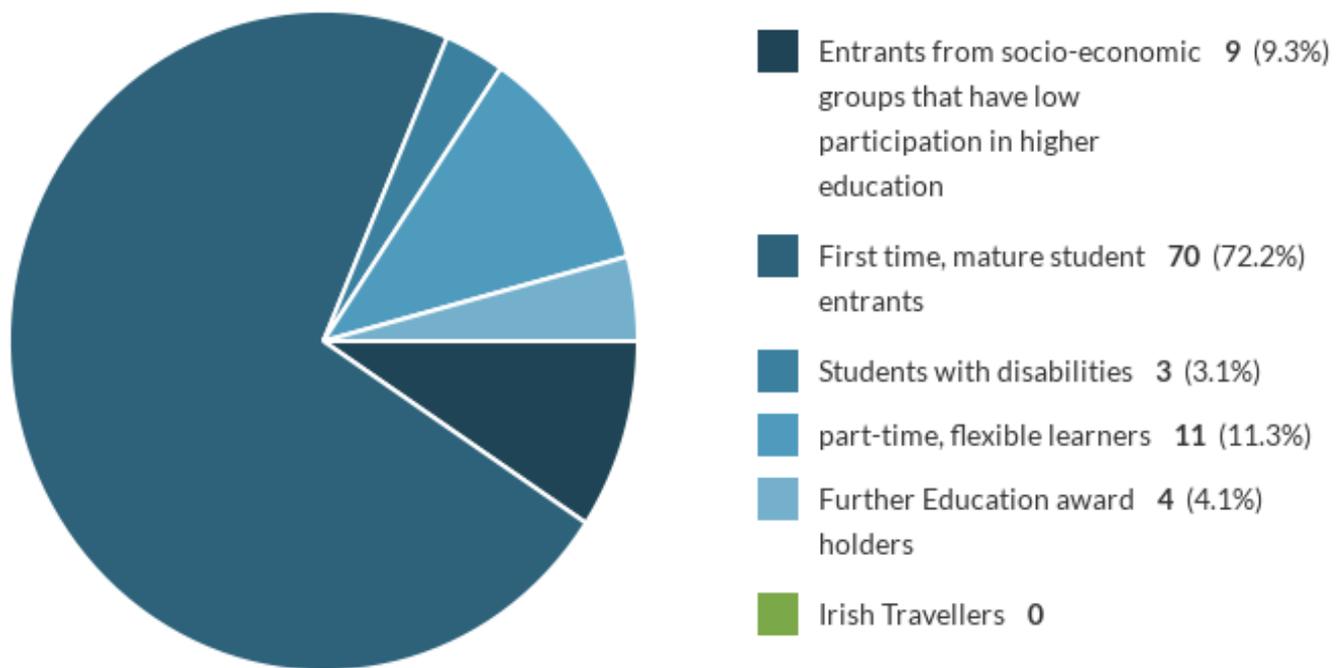


Figure 4 - Categorisation in terms of Access target populations

Overall there are ninety-seven responses (from n86) indicating intersectionality where some identify with more than one category. Seventy-two percent identify as “first-time mature students” whilst none identify as members of the Irish Traveller community.

Given the recent influx of migrants into the EU (Eurostat, 2017a), another survey question asked, “*At a European level, policies are being developed to create more diverse learning environments through the inclusion of more migrant learners. This includes people who have themselves migrated into Europe and also people who are second or third generation migrant. Can you please indicate if any of these descriptions match your experience?*”

The following emerges.

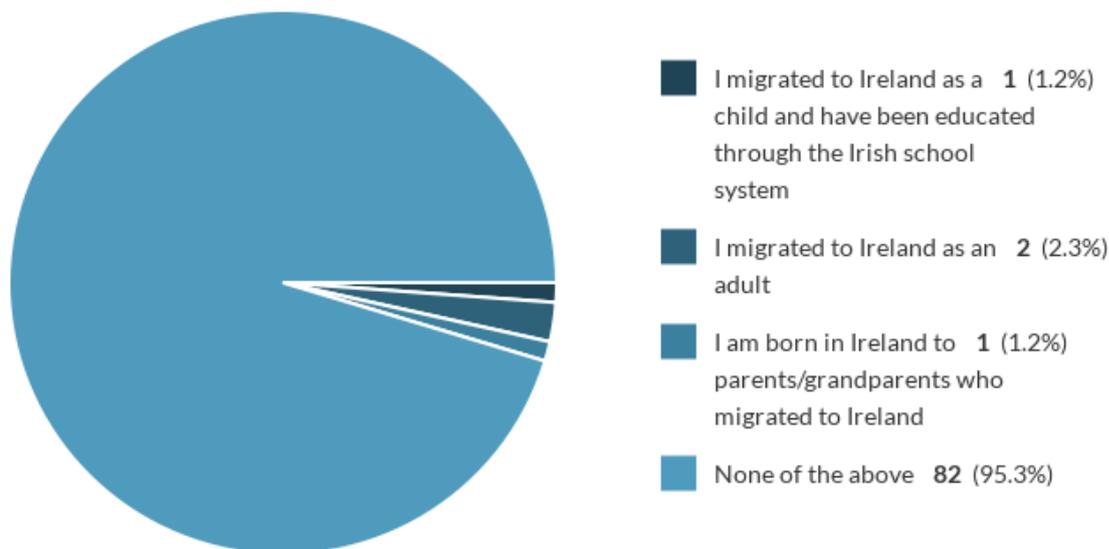


Figure 5 - Percentage of migrants on the RTL

Where relevant, respondents describe their migrant background by answering “If you answered yes to options 1-3, how would you describe your migrant background (e.g. what is your country of origin, how do you describe your own cultural identity)”

Four respondents share,

“born in England to Irish parents”,

“UK native”,

“Parents both came from Belgium to Ireland in 1948, I feel very Irish”, and

“British I am English and have lived here for 20 years”.

This student profile differs from participant profile on Maynooth University’s Access Certificate Foundation Certificates in Science and Engineering where n32 nationalities were identified across n291 students. Although 75% of students on the Certificates in Science and Engineering were Irish, 6% cited another European nationality, 9% cited an African nationality and 6% cite an Asian nationality. Two percent are from The Americas (Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015: 57).

Survey respondents identify the highest previous qualification they held before registering for the RTL.

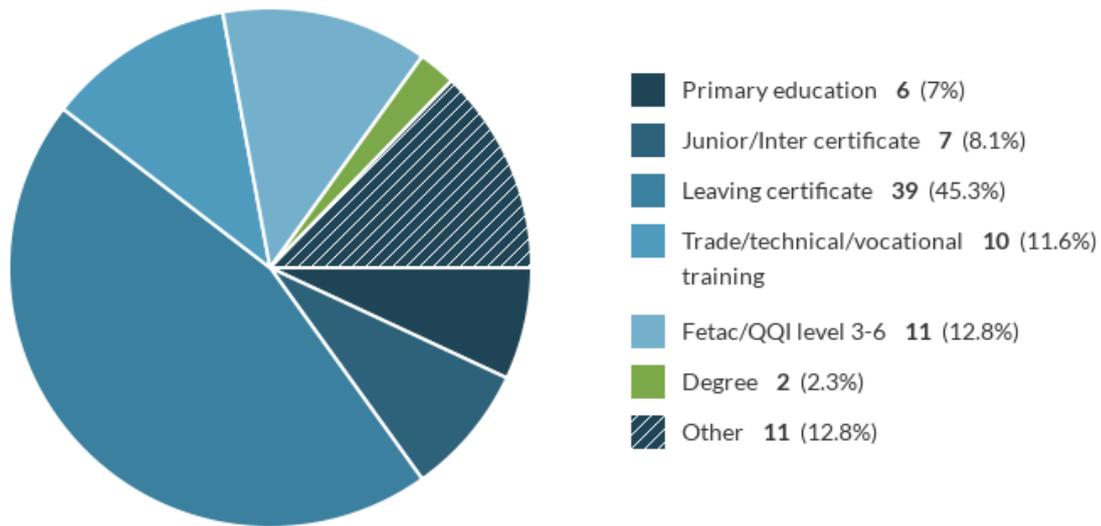


Figure 6 - Percentage breakdown of participant profile

Those who answer “other” list UK O-level qualifications, second-year in secondary school, advanced diploma from an Irish HEI, an advanced diploma from a UK HEI, a nursing qualification (x2), insurance based diploma (ALIA) and a diploma in dental nursing

5.1.2 Motivation for registering for the Certificate in Return to Learning

Survey participants were asked, “*What most motivated you to return to education?*” Choosing their response from the selected answers below, the following emerges.

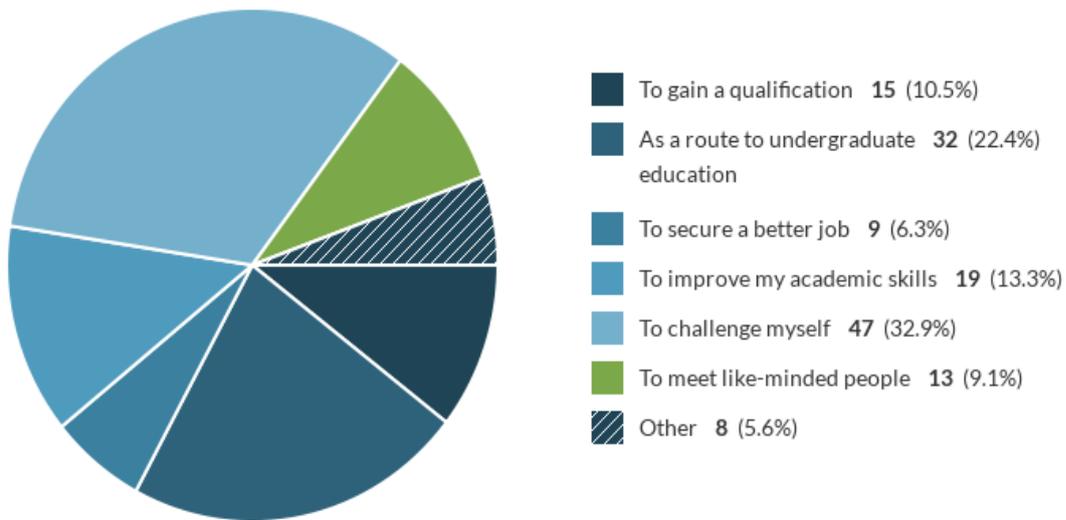


Figure 7 - Motivation to return to study

Eight of those to answer ‘other’ share their motivation as a life-decision made after serious illness, in order to change career (x2), to fulfil a lifelong ambition following retirement, and follow a personal goal to study English at university. Other motivating factors were to seek employment following a long period of care-work in the home, for personal satisfaction and to challenge oneself.

When asked, “*If the RTL had been a full-time course, would you have attended/been able to attend?*” a majority of 56% (n45) answered no with the remaining 44% (n36) answering yes.



Figure 8 - opinion on full-time versus part-time deliver of RTL

5.2 Performance, Retention and Progression

In total, 914 students registered for the Certificate in RTL from 2000-2016. Thirty-five of these are current students.

5.1.1 Overview of participation and completion rates

This table omits 35 students who are registered on the RTL at the time of the research.

| | Registration rates RTL | Completion rates RTL |
|--------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 2000-2001 | n30 | n28 |
| 2001-2002 | n17 | n16 |
| 2002-2003 | n33 | n23 |
| 2003-2004 | n30 | n19 |
| 2004-2005 | n31 | n26 |
| 2005-2006 | n31 | n24 |
| 2006-2007 | n37 | n29 |
| 2007-2008 | n71 | n46 |
| 2008-2009 | n94 | n62 |
| 2009-2010 | n88 | n55 |
| 2010-2011 | n77 | n55 |
| 2011-2012 | n84 | n64 |
| 2012-2013 | n68 | n38 |
| 2013-2014 | n74 | n50 |
| 2014-2015 | n51 | n30 |
| 2015-2016 | n63 | n34 |
| Total | n879 | n599 |

Table 2 - Registration and completion rates 2001-2016

As table 2 indicates, the average numbers of students expanded from 2007-2012. The highest intake is in the year 2008-2009 when 94 students registered across two campuses; Maynooth University in Co. Kildare and the university's satellite campus in Kilkenny. The average student intake per annum from 2000-2016 is 54.

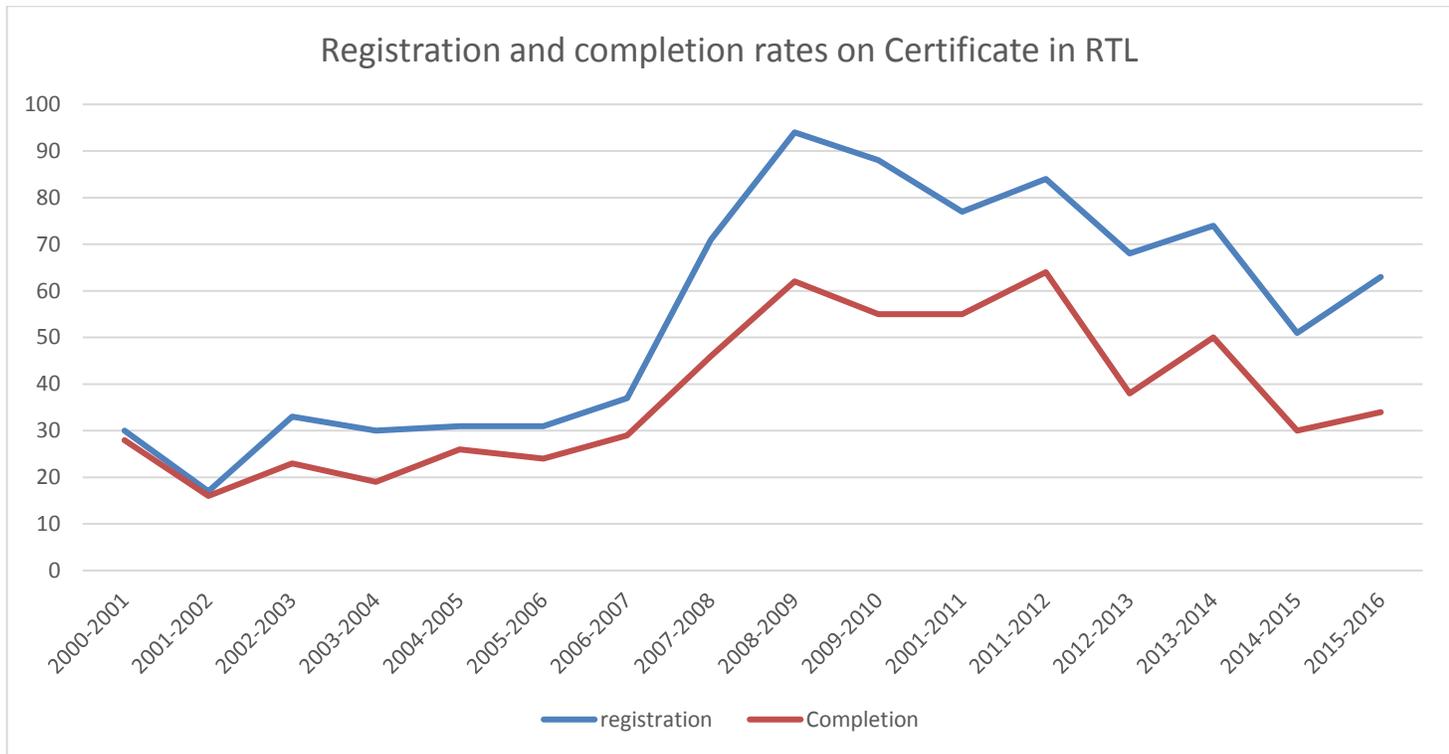


Figure 9 - Registration and completion rates on the RTL.

Of all students to register for the RTL, 68% (599) complete the programme. Thirty-two percent (280) do not complete the programme. The Maynooth University student records available to researchers did not differentiate between students who choose to exit the programme before completion and those who fail the programme recording both cohorts in the same way. However, qualitative interviews with staff directly involved in the RTL reveal low failure rates with the principal determinant for non-completion being student withdrawal.

5.2.2 Progression to undergraduate studies at Maynooth University

From all students who register for the RTL, 45% (395) students progressed to undergraduate studies at Maynooth University. This represents 66% of all those who complete the RTL. Another 40 progress to other certificate programmes at Maynooth university representing 4% of all students who register and 7% of all those who complete the programme.

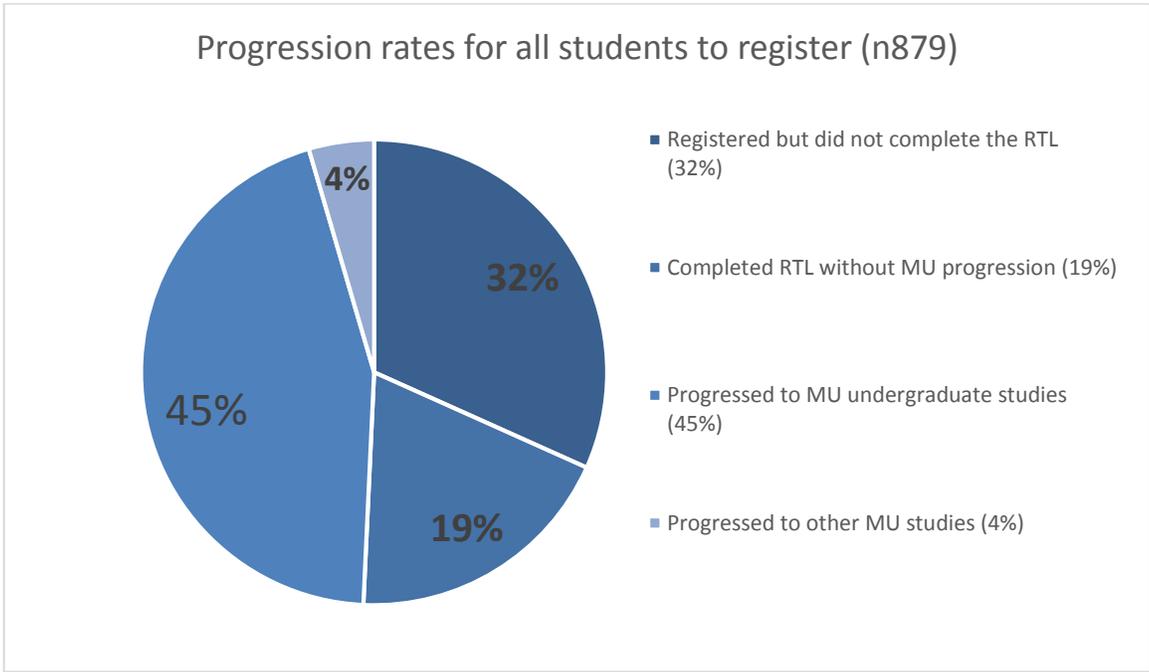


Figure 10 - Progression rates from the RTL

Of the 45% (395) of all who register who are known to have progressed to undergraduate studies at Maynooth University, 59% (234) complete their undergraduate studies whilst 18% (69) are current degree students.

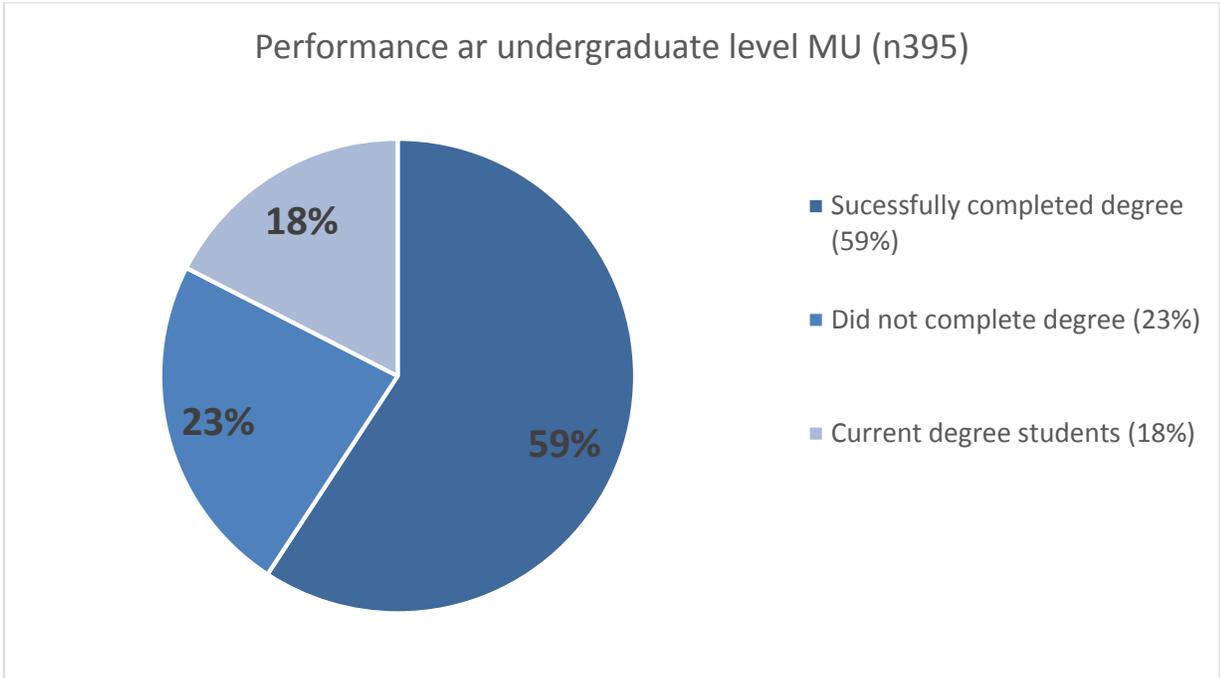


Figure 11 - performance at undergraduate level

5.2.3. Progression to post-graduate studies

To this point, information gathered from 2001-2015 (excluding the current RTL cohort) measures how 234 have graduated from undergraduate studies. Eighty-two students progressed to post-graduate studies at Maynooth University. This represents 35% of all those who have completed undergraduate studies post Certificate in RTL.

Of the 24 who register for a Higher Diploma, three did not finish and two are current Higher diploma students

Of the 60 to register for Masters studies, seven did not finish and five are current masters students

Of the eight who do register for PhD, one did not finish and three are current PhD students.

Further progression into postgraduate studies at MU can also be extrapolated as is demonstrated within figure 12.

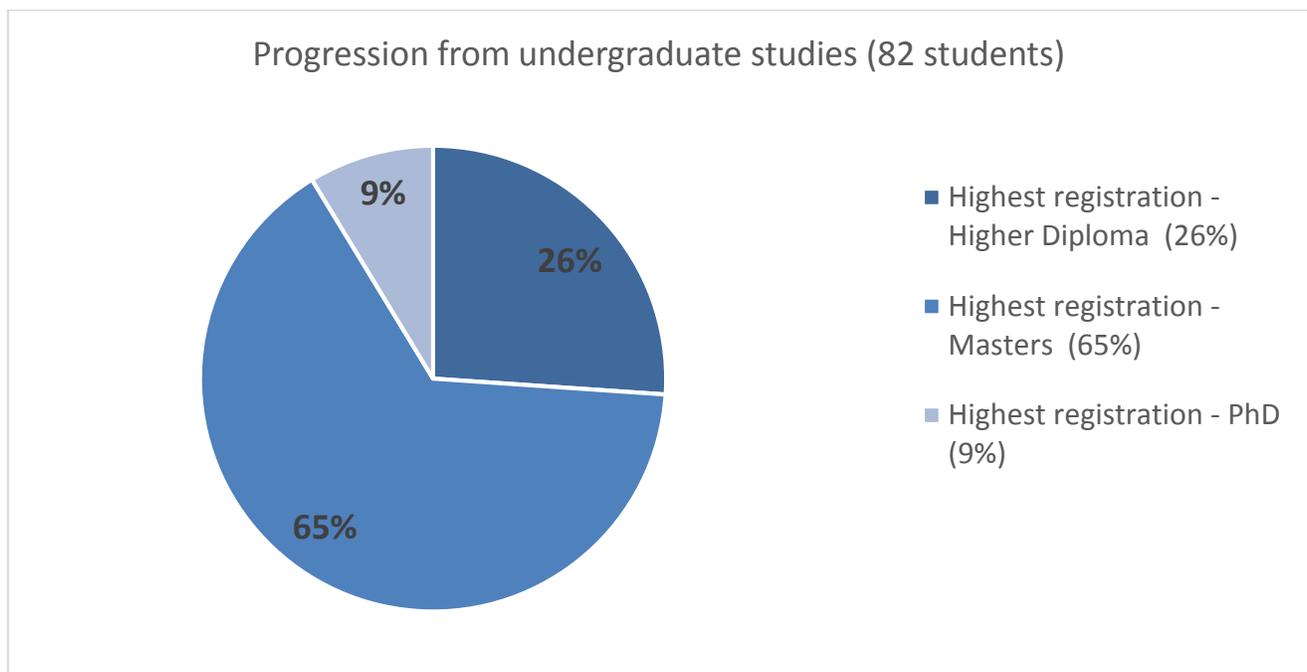


Figure 12 - progression from undergraduate studies

Readers will note a total of 92 recorded progression pathways, this is because all to register to PhD level had completed Masters studies and some to register for Masters studies previously registered as Higher Diploma students.

5.3 Experience on completion of Maynooth university studies.

In seeking a more holistic understanding, the optional survey (see Appendix 1) asks research participants “what did you do on completion of the course?” Sixty-three percent (54) of the 86 survey respondents cite progression to further studies at Maynooth University, a figure that mirrors statistics drawn from student records.

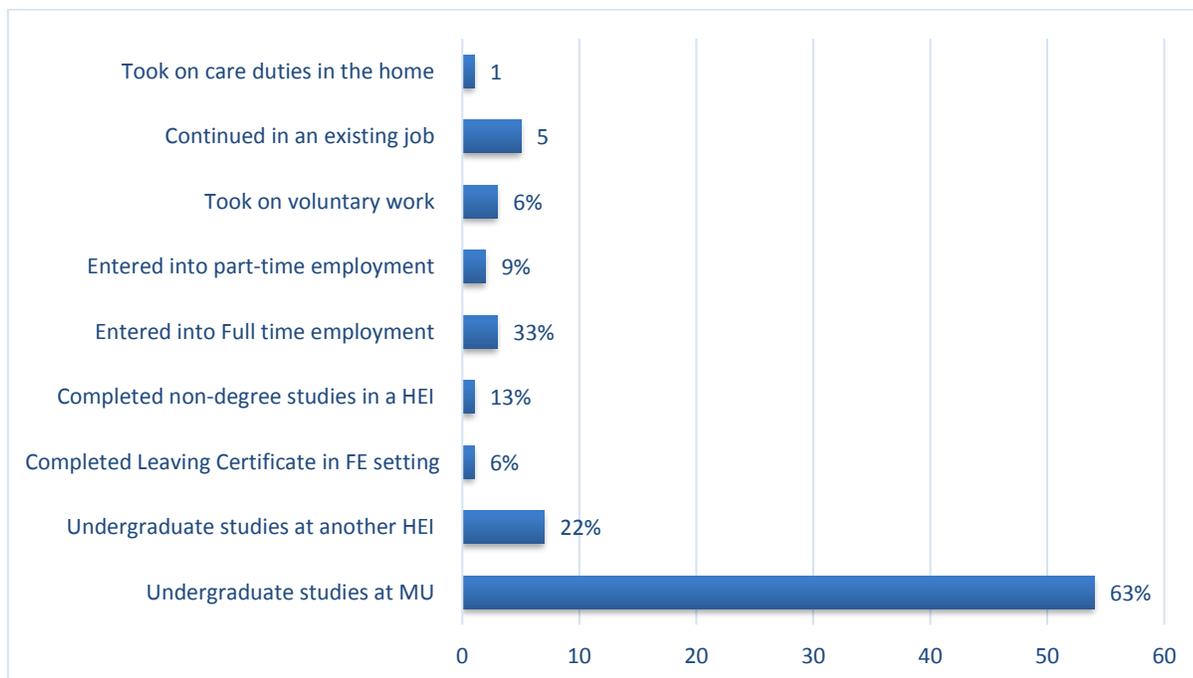


Figure 13 - Experiences on finishing the RTL

One open ended question asked survey respondents “*If you are currently employed, what is your occupation? (We realise that not everybody will be gainfully employed, if you are not currently working, please state, Unemployed)*”. Seventy-eight responses are received which reveal the following:

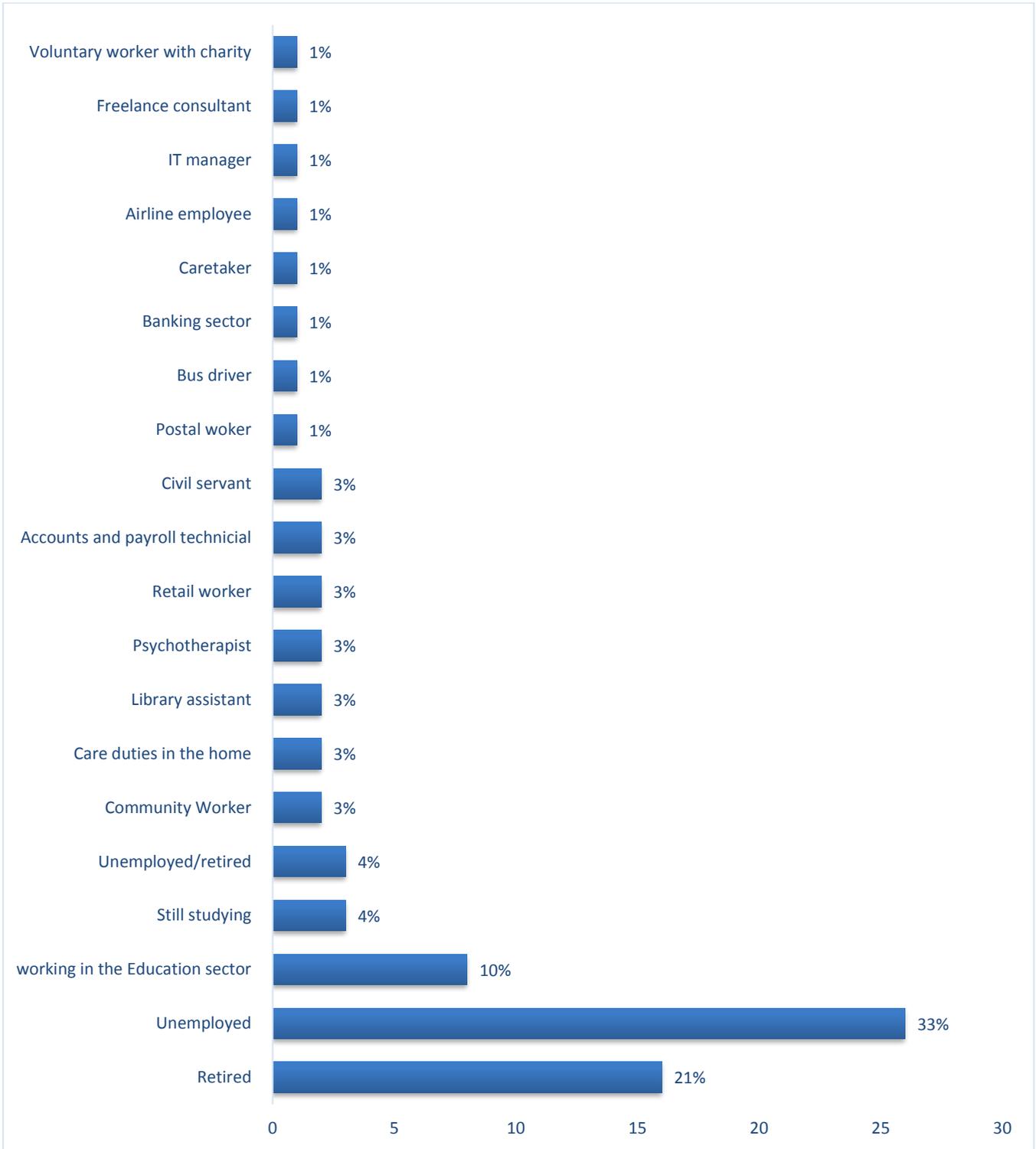


Figure 14 – Employment progression from the Certificate in RTL

Participants were asked to respond to the hypothesis “*If I had not completed the Certificate in RTL, I would not be working in the job I am currently in*”. Table 3 below reveals mixed opinion on this statement with 47% disagreeing with this statement. Thirty-four percent agree they would not be in their current job without the RTL whilst 18% are unsure.

| Strongly agree | Agree | Not sure if I agree or disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----------------------|--------------|--|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 26% (n10) | 8% (n3) | 18% (n7) | 29% (n11) | 18% (n7) |

Table 3 – If I had not completed the RTL would I be working in the job I am currently in?

5.4 Overview of key findings.

Student characteristics

- Sixty-one percent (61%) of students to register for the Certificate in Return to Learning are women and 39% are men.
- Seventy-five percent (75%) of all students to register for the Certificate in Return to Learning are over 30 years of age.
- Seventy-two percent (72%) of all entrants to identify their eligibility for access as first-time, mature students. Nine percent (9%) cite socio-economic disadvantage and 3% declare a disability. Eleven percent identify as part-time flexible learners and 4% are FE award holders. No research participants identify as Irish Traveller.
- Prior to entry, 45% declare holding a leaving certificate, 12% hold a technical/vocational qualification and 2% have previously completed a degree. Seven percent (7%) have previously been educated to primary level only.

Recruitment, retention and performance within RTL

- The average intake per annum from 2000-2016 is 54 students. The highest intake was 94 students who registered in the academic year 2008-2009.

- Sixty eight percent (68%) of all students who register for the Certificate in RTL between 2000 and 2016 successfully completed the programme.

Progression and retention post-RTL

From the point of registration,

- Forty-five percent (45%) of all students progress to further study within Maynooth University. This represents 66% of all students who complete the Certificate in Return to Learning
- Four percent (4%) register for other certificate studies in Maynooth University.
- Twenty-three percent (23%) of RTL graduates who register for under-graduate studies do not complete their degree programme.

Postgraduate progression

- Eighty-two students' progress to post-graduate studies. This represents 35% of those who complete undergraduate studies.
- From this cohort, 65% registered for Masters programmes as their highest registration, 26% registered for a higher diploma and 9% registered for a PhD programme.
- Five graduates of the Certificate in Return to Learning have completed doctoral studies.

Employment status

- From the 86 past-students who completed an anonymous online survey, 48% report being in employment, 33% are unemployed and 21% cite being retired.

Whilst these statistics give some insight into characteristics, performance, progression and retention, qualitative findings as detailed within the next two chapters add to the numeric measurement through the insight of participant experiences.

Chapter 6 Student Experience of the Certificate in Return to Learning

The best way to assess the effectiveness of the Certificate in Return to Learning (RTL) is, of course, to evaluate the impact on its target audience. This chapter does this by looking at experiences from the perspective of past- students of the certificate in RTL. Principally, this section relies on qualitative data generated through focus groups and student interviews; both e-interviews and tele-interviews. It also draws on qualitative elements of the online student survey completed via the online Bristol Online Survey (BOS) software package as detailed in section (4.4.3).

This chapter plays a significant role in determining the true value of the RTL programme and its strengths and weaknesses, as perceived by students who attended from 1992-2016. For the purpose of anonymity, student-participants of focus groups, tele-interviews, e-interviews have been named simply Focus Group, E-interview and tele-interview. Students who participated through the online survey have been identified simply as online-survey.

Student experiences have been analysed and grouped according to six emerging themes:

1. Student Motivations
2. Maynooth Experience
3. Student Fees
4. Student Learning Experiences
5. Progression
6. Recommendations

It should be noted that the students who contributed to this research span 25 years of enrolment on the RTL Certificate, from 1992 to 2017. Therefore, the experiences of those who participated in focus groups, interviews and the online survey reflect different phases of the course across a 25-year timeframe. As the course developed over the years, the operational procedures, curriculum, subjects and their delivery were also subject to change and evolution.

Each of the six emerging themes will now be discussed in more detail.

6.1 Motivations for undertaking the Certificate in Return to Learning

I remember my first day, walking over the bridge that joined the old Maynooth college to the new [campus] and feeling as nervous as hell and thinking to myself that I must be mad; that I was past it at the age of 43 and that, compared to these bright young students, I hadn't got a hope. But as I walked over that bridge with my bag on my shoulder, lost in the crowd of students that were busy with their own thoughts and agendas, it occurred to me, no one was looking at me or even concerned about why I was there. It dawned on me right there and then that I was just the same as them and that I had the same chance as them to change my life. I surprised myself by thinking: Yes. I belong here. (E-interview)

The research has uncovered a broad range of motivations for students wanting to engage with the RTL programme. Several recurring themes linked to change of lifestyle have emerged. Across qualitative encounters these are named as; retirement, redundancy, bereavement, health issues and changes in family circumstances.

Others talked about university simply in terms of an ambition or life goal. To give an example,

The RTL course allowed me to reach a level of education previously denied. It also allowed me to fulfil a lifelong ambition to teach. (Online-survey)

And, as stated by another survey respondent “as a retired person, I wanted to fulfill a life-long ambition to go to university and get a degree” (online-survey).

Other survey respondents were motivated to enrol on the RTL because, “Illness led me to do something I always had in me” and “The RTL offered a route to a career change”. From others, “I was at a loose end occupationally and I was unsure where I was going in my life”, “I had a desire for further education and personal satisfaction” and “To prove to myself I could do it”. One final of many explanations we have chosen reads,

I had the specific goal of studying English at university, something I had wished to do for many years. As a stay at home mum for many years, I wanted to re-educate myself in order to re-enter the workforce

6.1.1 Age as a motivating factor.

The age range of participants, throughout the research varies considerably, from 21 to 71 years of age. The age of respondents appears to be an important factor in their motivations for returning to education. For example, a respondent who was around the minimum age on entry (21 years old) told us how she had returned to education after an unplanned pregnancy. She described herself as a *“troubled youth, [who had been] kicked out of school”* and a former Youthreach student. She went on to say that *“the RTL saved me. It gave me the confidence and I have excelled at everything since. I am teaching now”* (tele-interview).

When asked about their motivations for enrolling on the RTL, one focus group participant shared their idealistic vision of what they imagined university was like, prior to entry, *“I thought I’d be strolling down leafy avenues discussing ideas with all the young students!”* (focus group). This romantic view of university started an interesting conversation among participants, about age and motivations, with one participant stating,

That’s what I love about mature students; it shows the difference between adults and young peoples’ motivations for doing a course. Young people get educated for a job and that’s not their fault, that’s the system. We got the job first and the education later. (Focus group)

The majority of participants in two of the focus groups, felt that the younger students that were on the RTL with them were motivated more towards career development and employment opportunities, whereas they felt that they as older students were more motivated by the challenge, the desire for knowledge and a sense of personal fulfilment. This is demonstrated through the following contributions and further in the next section, Retirement as a motivating factor, *“I was always very interested in learning, but life got in the way”* (online-survey). In another example, *“Something happened, and I just thought there must be more to life”* (Focus group). And again, *“I wanted to be with likeminded people”* (Focus group).

6.1.2 Retirement as a motivating factor

The principles of Lifelong Learning are brought clearly into focus when we look at the motivations of retired people, their thirst for knowledge, their capacity for change and their desire for personal transformation. To give some examples, in talking about their retirement, one respondent stated,

I undertook the RTL course to challenge myself and to occupy my free time during the day. I had never previously undertaken third level education. The experience and change this course brought about in me was enlightening and I subsequently attempted to take on a full-time Arts degree course in Maynooth. (Online-survey).

Another respondent talked about wanting to use their retirement and their experience of university to help young people from marginalised communities, stating, *“I’m not ready to retire yet. I’d love to help kids in disadvantaged areas, especially to help them to understand that college is not as daunting as certainly they think it is”* (Focus group). Another retiree spoke about enrolling on the RTL as doing something for themselves, having raised a family, he said, *“I have loads of things to do, but they are for somebody else. This was for me”*. (Focus group)

The age mix was something participants had to negotiate. This point is illuminated when one participant speaks directly about the differing ages and motivations for doing the RTL, saying, *“while I was older and retired, there were younger people involved in my year. They had one eye on the career ladder. It’s hard to get the balance right”* (Focus group).

6.1.3 Familial Motivations

Another major motivation for returning to education was linked to familial commitments and circumstances, including separation, bereavement and caring for family members with illness or disabilities. On the subject of bereavement and loss, one past student kindly shared with researchers their struggle after the loss of a parent, *“when my mother died, I had a breakdown and needed to do something. The RTL helped me through this difficult time”*. Furthermore, researchers received a heart-warming email from the husband of a now, sadly deceased former student. The email tells us of the transformational experience that his wife had on the RTL and is contained in its entirety in Appendix 10.

Another respondent talked about how leaving work to care for school going children became an opportunity to return to education,

I took early retirement from work, as I had to look after kids, but while they were at school, I had time. There was no culture of education after school when I left. I worked full-time for 33 years but I always felt I'd like the opportunity to study.
(Focus group)

Various research reports highlight the positive effects of parents who attend university, with children of university-educated parents “twice as likely as their less advantaged peers to enter higher education”. (Ball, 2013:15). One respondent noted that “*the fact that I have been in college, means I have been able to help my children because I have been through it, every step of the way*” (Focus group). Others reported being encouraged and supported by their children who were university graduates. One focus group participant told us how, after completing the RTL, he brought his daughter to crèche in Maynooth while he was doing his degree. Now, 23 years later, she is also due to complete her degree at Maynooth.

6.2 The Maynooth University experience

This section will briefly outline the general themes that arose in terms of the Maynooth experience, before being further examined and evidenced under the subsequent headings. In general terms, past students reported extremely positive experiences of the Certificate in Return to Learning at Maynooth University. Most notable was the affection and respect with which participants spoke about the core tutors, which will be discussed in more detail under student learning experience (Section 6.4). Many students spoke about the social aspects of the course, the new friendships and the importance of peer support. The majority of students who attended focus groups were keen to highlight the importance of attending on campus, while one focus group attendee shared her experiences of completing the RTL off campus. Some students also referred to particular experiences and observations linked to issues of gender, class, disability and inter-culturalism on the RTL. The financial aspects of returning to education were discussed under funding and participation supports. And in section 6.3, student opinions and views in relation to tuition fees are presented.

6.2.1 Peer Support and the Certificate in RTL

As an adult-centred course, the RTL programme comprises a lot of group and project work. This group work can often enhance relationships between students and promotes the ability of groups to self-care. Respondents reported positive experiences regarding the peer groups that

were formed during the RTL and emphasised the importance of the support they received from one another during their studies. As articulated by one past student, *“Making friends with people on the RTL helped greatly in feeling comfortable in the college environment. I never felt conscious of my age”* (online-survey).

Similarly, another survey respondent stated, *“I have remained friends with people I met on the course that I feel will remain friends for life”* (online-survey). As students progressed to undergraduate level, many spoke of how they continued to sit together in lectures and support each other, with one respondent stating,

Very crucially, I made friends there. I went on to do a degree and those friends became very necessary to me as I went through the college experience, for bouncing ideas off, or when you're really feeling 'I can't do this', you ring your pal. If I hadn't had those connections, I don't think college would have been such a good experience for me. (Online-survey).

6.2.2 Gender, culture and class

As mentioned previously (section 5.2.1), women are more likely to engage with Humanities/Arts courses and the part-time structure may also be more practical for women because of its flexible structure of morning or evening sessions. This includes the broader social, cultural and economic circumstances in which women are more inclined to participate with educational pathways that offer the flexibility to study while caring for the family. Within Chapter five, a gender differential is quantitatively demonstrated where 61% of the past-students are female, while 39% were male. These figures are in keeping with focus group discussions, where a small number of research participants noted that there were slightly more women on the course than men overall.

Very little reference to cultural diversity was made by participants. However, one discussion among focus group attendees in one group, suggested that there were some people on the RTL whose English may not have been sufficient to complete the course. One focus group member commented that he felt that they “slowed down the learning for everyone else” (Focus group).

Focus group participants talked openly about notions of class. Themes of belonging and the perceived exclusivity of university education were raised, with one past student stating that “where I come from people don't go to university. I never thought I'd get the opportunity” (Focus group). The notion of class and education is encapsulated in the following comment where a focus group attendee, spoke about how their view of themselves, changed on

completion of their university experience, *“I felt like a second-class citizen before education”*. (Focus group)

6.2.3 On campus & Off campus Experience

The benefits of becoming familiar with the Maynooth University campus during the RTL was identified as being extremely important, especially for those students who subsequently progressed to undergraduate study within Maynooth. As stated by one focus group participant, *“You got to know your way round, make friends and supports, so it was less lonely. The further I went on, as people left, the lonelier it got”* (Focus group).

Other research participants who experienced the Maynooth campus RTL, spoke directly of the importance of the on campus experience for them in terms of progression, with one student commenting,

You’re so far ahead when you come into university, you know the library, you know what’s expected of you. I’m in third year now and they are still teaching people some of the things we learned on the RTL. (Online-survey)

This was not an isolated perspective but was shared by others also.

Conversely, a past student who attended a full-time outreach RTL off campus in Newbridge offered a different perspective sharing, *“I didn’t do the Maynooth RTL, I found University very intimidating, I thought it’s not for me, our people didn’t go there, and still don’t, and that’s still the case”* (Focus group).

This research participant also felt that more needed to be done by universities in non-traditional access communities, saying, *“if it’s only available on campus then you are excluding rural people completely, it’s important to reach out, maybe in an outreach way”* (Focus group).

6.2.4 Funding & Participation Supports

As mentioned previously (section 3.3.1) some of the negative aspects of the RTL’s part-time status relate to funding and services and support measures. Currently, there is no state financial supports for part-time Higher Education courses despite some grant aid being available for those studying full time. There are exceptions such as the springboard initiative (Springboard,

2017). The determining factor is whether these programmes have been classified as leading to work; or to use policy language, where people will become ‘jobs-ready’.

6.3 Student Fees

Students had mixed experiences of paying fees. Some felt that paying fees actually motivated them to do well. This point of view is captured in one contribution as follows, *“When you pay a thousand euro for a course, it gives you a certain focus. When it’s free, it has a lesser worth”* (Focus group).

However, others reported struggling to make ends meet. One woman talked about the pressure that paying fees exerted on her family, stating, *“my husband was working really hard at the time to pay the mortgage and keep the kids going, and I was really conscious that I was going to suck more resources out of the house”* (Focus group). This participant goes on to say how, during her time, there were some supports available and she did receive some help towards her fees, *“I went to see [names person] at [names organisation], they helped me out”*.

It should be noted, that over a 25-year period, the fees and funding parameters have changed considerably from year to year. While a focus group member reported that they received partial funding from their local Community Welfare Officer, this practice was at the discretion of each officer and is no longer available, and will be discussed further in section 7.4.

6.4 Student Learning Experiences

In general, discussions around learning experiences focused again around the core tutors and their positive contributions to student learning. In particular the high level of care and support given by them and their ability to build confidence and self-belief in adult learners. The importance of the skills based curriculum was highlighted and learners spoke highly of the presentation and group work elements of the course. Researchers received many testimonials from students who were eager to impress upon us the important role core tutors played in their successful educational experiences. To give just one example, but one that captures widespread sentiment,

It was a fantastic experience from beginning to end. I had completed my education at Intermediate Certificate level in the 1960s, so this was a wonderful opportunity for me to dip my toe into the third level education system to see if I was capable and if I would enjoy taking my studies further. I was an administrator in Maynooth University when I pursued the RTL, and I found it a wonderful way of giving me a much better understanding of the role of the student and the lecturer. I could see the wood for the trees from then on! I am most grateful to [core Tutors], they were a wonderful team. (Online-survey)

A full list of student testimonials are contained in Appendix 8.

There were a small number of negative remarks regarding the suitability and selection of students, as previously mentioned (section 6.2), some students felt that there were others whose grasp of English was not sufficient for a level 5 course. The suitability of other students was also questioned. One particular student suggests a stricter intake procedure, saying,

Having just completed the RTL I would recommend that a screening interview be held for students who had not completed a secondary education. It was difficult and very distracting to endure some students that constantly were late and disruptive throughout the first term. I don't know who was paying their fee, or who recommended them to attend the RTL. The 2nd term was much more enjoyable in their absence. (Online-survey)

A focus group attendee also commented, “Some people who were selected for the course had deeper issues than just learning, behavioural issues”.

6.4.1 Skills Taught

Some of the practical skills taught on the RTL Certificate programme include essay writing and critical reading skills. Students felt that the core skills based curriculum was a necessary and important part of the successful preparation for undergraduate studies. Essay writing and the presentation skills were seen as extremely important, to give one example,

The RTL course taught me the necessary skills of how to write in an academic way, how to research, have faith and confidence in my ideas and to work as part of a team. Most important of all to ask questions, to stretch my mind and to have fun learning. It also gave me an opportunity to build up a network of friends that would see me through my degree years. (E-interview)

Other research participant mentioned that writing a book review as part of the course signalled the awakening of their critical thinking processes. Respondents also spoke highly of the end of year presentation, “*The most rewarding experience for me was when we were asked to do a project on a subject of our own choosing*” (E-interview). Students generally felt that this assignment, particularly the process of presenting to their peers, was of huge benefit in building their confidence, as expressed by one focus group participant:

I think one of the most important things was that the RTL enabled you to look at yourself and examine your own capabilities, and this was given to us from the ground up, building your self-confidence (E-interview).

The past-students who participated in this research describe how tutors on the RTL have an arrangement that RTL students can engage in lectures around the university on a drop-in basis. In this way, RTL students could sample various lectures and content of degree subjects. While one student cited feeling apprehensive about entering a lecture hall for the first time, fearing that they “*would have stuck out like a sore thumb*”, (Focus group) most who did participate, felt that it was a very useful experience,

You were also encouraged to sit in on any class in the college that was a really great help, I went into first and second year lectures. As I went to one, I thought this is great and then other people came along with me. (Focus group)

6.4.2 Curriculum

Discussions during each of the four focus groups highlighted the many changes to the RTL curriculum over the years, since its inception in 1992. When asked, which aspects of the course students would like to see changed, some students in two of the focus groups, as well as one e-interview respondent, suggested that a lack of exam preparation and practice was a major disadvantage. Demonstrating the changing curriculum over the years, other participants who attended during different years contradicted this, saying that they had done exam preparation. The same theme occurred with referencing with one focus group attendee commenting, *“I did the RTL 18 years ago and what I’m hearing is, a lot of the improvements I could think of have already been implemented”*.

It is therefore safe to suggest that like many courses, the RTL responded on a year-to-year basis to feedback from students and was constantly developing and adapting its curriculum. Although the timings of these changes are almost impossible to accurately pin-point, exam preparation is currently listed as a module on the RTL programme. (DACE, 2017)

As previously outlined (section 6.4.1), the skills taught on the RTL are mainly delivered through the subjects of English literature and the Classics. Prior to 1998, sociology was taught, in place of the Classics by a previous tutor, who no longer works for DACE. While many students spoke about developing a love for these subjects, one student outlined their initial trepidation,

When I came to induction and I found out it was English literature and Greek history, I said no, I’m not doing that, and I went to walk away. But I met somebody who had done it before and they said to give it a go and I absolutely loved it. It changed me, not only my attitude to English literature but everything; everything about life almost. It was an incredible experience. (Focus group)

Not everyone had such a positive experience of the curriculum, as highlighted by one focus group participant,

“I’m a practical person. There was no value in the Classics for me, but I had an interest in English. I didn’t do any of the Greek and Roman [studies], it meant absolutely nothing to me”.

The subjects and their relevance generated in-depth discussion and debate among participants at one focus group. While one respondent found that *“Greek and Roman was harder because I wasn’t in to it”*. Another stated that,

It didn't really matter what the subjects were, we were learning skills around these. Also, later on, when we were doing our degree, you weren't into every subject, but you learned how to cope with it.

Similarly, a survey respondent commented that they “*now regard the course's narrow focus, rather than a more generalised and expansive programme, to be its greatest strength*” (online-survey).

As mentioned previously (Section 3.3), the RTL course is structured across three days, with three mornings and one evening session, (which is essentially three separate cohorts). If we take the Monday to Wednesday morning cohort for example, this group is divided in two, half of the group is taught mainly by one tutor while the other tutor teaches the second group, then later, and they are swapped. Some students were critical of this particular structure, with one focus group attendee saying,

because the essay writing was done by [core tutor A], I felt I was lucky and some felt that they were unlucky in not being in that class first. It wasn't till you were actually with [core tutor A] that you would say, now I have it. [Core tutor B] was better at the critical thinking.

6.4.3 Subject Choices

There was criticism directed at the lack of subject choices, with one past student remarking that “*young people get the choice of subjects, so why can't adults?*” There were questions raised about the Arts only subjects and the fact that the course doesn't really cater for “*scientific minded people*” (focus group). Another student commented, “*I would like a broader choice of subjects to be included to give a taste of what is available on the degree courses*” (online-survey).

More directly, the lack of IT skills training was highlighted. Respondents talked about relying on each other for these skills. One focus group participant describes how there was somebody in his year who was “*good with computers*” and “*helped out*” others with their projects, but that the RTL did not deliver it as part of the course. A small number of respondents referred directly to the lack of IT skills when asked how the course could be improved,

I do think the course could be improved by the inclusion of computer skills. Many older students' experience of, for example, word documents, is limited. Therefore, some instruction in computer skills would greatly help confidence levels when tackling essays and project work. (Online-survey)

With another student commenting, *“It was an excellent course and I thoroughly enjoyed it. My only problem was my lack of IT skills”* (online-survey).

6.4.4 Examinations

The RTL operates a continuous assessment model and does not have an end of year exam. However, as many RTL students’ progress to undergraduate courses where end of semester exams are the norm, some felt that the RTL had not prepared them adequately for this. While exam preparation has been delivered in recent years, some felt that exams should be included as part of the RTL skillset. Some students would like to see exam-based assessment included in the course, with one student making several suggestions around exam preparation namely, *“doing mocks with no grading, seeing sample papers or perhaps showing a video to see what exam halls look like, invigilators, table numbers, etc.”*

This focus-group participant went on to talk about how important this is to mature students who *“may not have seen an exam hall in years”*. The same respondent pointed out how a *“lack of confidence in exams can affect RTL student’s choice of degree course going forward”* suggesting that some students who progressed, deliberately chose continuously assessed courses, in order to *“avoid exams”* (Focus group). Another focus group member said, *“If there could be exams? I suffered from panic attacks, a lot who progress felt unprepared for exams. Exam preparation would have been useful”*.

However, it must be noted that the issue of exams was divisive among focus group attendees. This is demonstrated through an exchange within one group where one attendee believed that exams would have been *“too much,”* and in fact would have *“dissuaded”* them from doing the RTL. This contribution was supported by others and additional comments ranged from *“that would have put me off”* to *“I just wasn’t ready for exams”*. With one focus group attendee commenting,

it might be difficult to fit a lot more in to the RTL, because people are coming from all different levels and you know, as you say about doing exams, it might be a step too far. You know, you need the basics first.

6.4.5 Teaching Methods and Supports

The RTL programme is run by the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE), and as such, demonstrates identifiable core adult education teaching methods. These can be observed in the use of group work and project work, which are fundamental to the core principles of adult education. This is because of how these methodologies nurture safe, dialogical and reflective spaces for students. Although students may not have been aware of the methodological approach adopted by the core tutors, the vast majority of respondents spoke very highly of their positive contributions, particularly in terms of their ability to create strong groups, their patience, understanding, and ability to build confidence in learners and give support to people who are struggling,

I cannot deny that in the beginning I struggled, because I had been away from education for such a long time and wasn't even sure that I could write a sentence let alone an essay. And as for research come on, I thought you have got to be kidding me. However, I needn't have worried, again [core tutors] were prepared for us. They asked us to sit in a circle, on the floor where they had place several items and they asked us to pick one, I picked a necklace. They explained that they would begin telling a story and that each one of us would have to continue the story incorporating the item that we had selected. It was a little daunting but turned out to be great fun. We found that with a little encouragement that our minds were awoken and that we could be creative. (E-interview)

And,

Like many mature students, I felt unsure of what would be expected of me at undergrad level. The RTL course was crucial in helping me decide that it was possible for me to study at third level. The encouragement and assistance I got from [core tutors] made a huge difference. (Online-survey)

6.4.6 Perceived strengths of the RTL

While perceived challenges for students on the RTL have already been raised in this chapter, the overriding strength of the RTL was unilaterally cited as the course tutors. According to numerous past students, the tutors demonstrate great respect for the learners, teaching in a way that encourages and includes the whole group, even if learners have varied capabilities. Students reported their natural ability to engage with people on a psychological level and draw out their potential. One past student observed that they are “*great friends who work well together and are critical without being demoralising.*” Another said, “*I was encouraged, motivated and inspired by the two wonderful [core tutors] who are teaching the course. Their*

passion for their subjects and dedication to their students was hugely inspiring” (online-survey).

Alongside the course tutors, the next perceived strength is the Skill based curriculum and was cited as being a major strength of the RTL, with one student encapsulating the sentiment in the following statement,

My experience was a very positive one and gave me the tools and support necessary in researching and writing up on that research. This, I felt, was very important for me and later when I pursued a degree full time. (Online-survey)

And another, *“the skills learned on RTL will help me hit the ground running. Especially essay writing and critical reading” (online-survey).*

The on campus experience was also cited as being very important and many students who progressed felt that doing the RTL on campus was a major part of their success. Another major perceived strength in terms of progression and the experience were the strong groups that were formed during the RTL and which students cited as being an important support and a critical strength of the RTL.

6.5 Student Progression

Students spoke very highly of the RTL in terms of the quality of the skills they learned, and how well it prepared them for progression. To give some examples,

The RTL was hugely beneficial in preparing me for third level education. I would have struggled to survive first year and would most definitely have dropped out of college. My children have benefited from my experience. (Online-survey)

From another voice,

Without The RTL, I would not have gained the confidence to enter Maynooth University to complete an Arts Degree and subsequently go onto further study to become a primary school teacher. (Online-survey)

Again,

There is no question, but without the new knowledge and skills I learned on the RTL course I would never have been adequately prepared for, nor would have passed, the entrance exams I took for two undergraduate degree courses. (Online-survey)

One final voice which illuminates this dominant theme states “*I felt the RTL was essential for me, not having any academic training*” (online-survey).

6.6 Student Recommendations

The research team viewed the opportunity to engage with the qualitative material offered by students as an asset to be used in the development of the review of the RTL. As such, the wealth and depth of student experience and student-participants’ reflections, has been used to explore possible changes and ideas for development. The following recommendations are presented as a broad range of overall comments and recommendations,

1. Students would like to see a broader subject choice for wider progression routes.
2. Students would like to see a broader choice of progression options with more flexible model of payment, e.g. they would like the option of BA and Masters with a pay by module option.
3. Students would ideally like to see a part-time and full-time option for the RTL.
4. Student felt that more needed to be done to promote the RTL, particularly in areas of non-traditional access.
5. Some students suggested a renaming of the RTL, as they felt it did not sufficiently represent its merits as a course and the broad range of skills offered.

6.7 Summary of key findings to emerge from student qualitative research

Key points to emerge from the qualitative aspects of student experiences are

- In general terms, past students of the RTL reported extremely positive experiences of the RTL at Maynooth. Most notable was the affection and respect with which participants spoke about the core tutors who students felt were a critical part of their success. This approach was embodied through two core-tutors who have been coordinating the programme since its inception.
- The adult education methodologies of dialogue, participation, hands-on approaches and student-centeredness that underpin the RTL, offer a much-needed level of support.
- The strength of the peer-group was also cited as fundamental in forming supports that lasted throughout their Maynooth experience.
- The benefits of on campus experience during the RTL was identified as being extremely important, especially for those students who subsequently progressed to undergraduate study within Maynooth.
- Students have mixed experiences and opinions on the issue of fees. Some felt that paying fees actually motivated them to do well while others reported struggling to make ends meet.
- Participants felt that the core skills based curriculum, essay writing, readings skills etc. were a necessary and important part of the successful preparation for undergraduate studies.
- Some students were critical of a lack of subject choice. Most notably, most felt that IT skills needed to be included as a core skill. Some others also felt that they would have liked a science and maths option.
- In general terms, some students felt that they would like more options in terms of subject choices and options for progression. While others regarded the narrow focus of the RTL in terms of its skills and subjects, as a key strength.

- While some felt that the continuous assessment model was ideal, others, who went on to exam based undergraduate studies, reported feeling underprepared. More worryingly, some reported deliberately avoiding exam based undergraduate courses post RTL.
- Students would ideally like to see a part-time and full-time option.

Chapter 7- Staff Experience of the Certificate in Return to Learning

This chapter draws primarily from staff interviews conducted as part of this research. As detailed within section 2.3.1, a total, 13 staff participated in semi-structured interviews. While the majority of interviews with staff were conducted on a one-to-one basis, four staff were interviewed in pairs. Interviews were carried out between December 2016 and April 2017.

While the purpose of the qualitative engagement with students was to get a clear sense of student experiences on the RTL programme, the staff engagement was more operational from a research perspective. Core staff were interviewed first, and were an invaluable resource in piecing together the historical evolution of the programme (Chapter 3) as well as offering insight into the various operational and structural procedures, they raised questions and suggested possible changes for the development of the programme into the future. Tutors, heads of Department, Administration, Access, Library and Admissions staff were instrumental in the findings of the following section.

The staff experience is presented under the following emergent themes,

1. Experience of the programme
2. The value of the RTL
3. Maynooth Experience
4. Student challenges and supports
5. Curriculum
6. Operational issues for RTL
7. Staff recommendations for RTL Suggestions for change

Each theme will now be explored in more detail. In order to avoid misattribution, the Staff participants in the research have been randomly assigned numbers 1-11.

7.1 Experience of the programme

The staff experience of the RTL is overall very positive. Although those interviewed as part of this research did not know the exact figures, staff across all the departments who come into contact with this cohort have a sense that RTL students do very well and that there is a high rate of progression. There is a strong sense of ownership within DACE and staff speak very highly of the RTL and its students as they feel it forms an important part of the Department of Adult and Community Education. This feeling comes from the strong sense of community that exists around the RTL, with past students both working and studying in DACE and in and around the wider university.

7.2 Perception on the value of the Certificate in Return to Learning

All the Staff participants interviewed, spoke very highly of the RTL programme and in particular, of the two core tutors. To give some examples,

They are brilliant at teaching adults, and people out of education, and they provide so much encouragement to them and give them the confidence to go on, to the detriment of themselves I am sure. They are so self-effacing and may not see the amazing impact they have had on students (7).

This was not an isolated opinion and other comments included, *“The Tutors have been critical to the success of this (6)”*, and *“I see it as a great honour to have worked with them” (3)*. Staff felt that a key part of the value of the RTL was that the tutors really understood the complexities of being an adult learner and the course was designed with their needs in mind, *“they get huge support from the tutors, the quality of all the small steps they take in addition to the one on one feedback they get, gives them great opportunities the whole way along” (8)*, and *“They are incredible educators, warm, understanding and have a knack of getting the best out of people” (5)*.

One particularly well-placed staff member spoke about the function of the RTL in *“building confidence”* and preparing students for undergraduate studies. *“I can’t say enough for what this programme has done for first years coming in, in terms of confidence, and I worked with them for years” (4)*.

Another staff member, spoke about the value of the adult education methodologies, which are embedded within the RTL, saying, *“a lot have been out of school for a long time and they may have had bad experiences there too, getting them to understand that this is different, is key”* (10).

Other staff felt that the Value of the RTL was in providing flexible access to non-traditional students. The part time evening and day course structure was seen as a key part of this flexibility, and its importance in terms of access is illustrated in the following comment, *“a lot of mothers do the day course, I associate that class with that, whereas the evening classes are more people who are working and maybe looking to change direction”* (10).

Another key strength identified by staff around the value of the RTL was in relation to the perceived progression rates within humanities, and the value to the wider university this brings. Staff also felt that in terms of progression, the 60% guaranteed entry to MH101, was a considerable value to the faculty, coupled with the high progression of the RTL, it was felt that it creates good revenue streams for the University, *“the advantage to the University is huge, there is an extremely good track record of progression, which is a fantastic stream of revenue for Universities”* (3).

Another well-placed member of staff makes the point that the RTL is an important part of the mature student intake, for which MU is synonymous, saying, *“Mature intake is approx. 15% with many of the matures coming through RTL”* (6).

One of the most notable and defining characteristic of its value, as one staff member told us, is how when she meets former students around campus, that they always want to speak in terms of their transformative experiences, telling her how the *“RTL has made such an impact on them”* (8).

7.3 Staff thoughts about the Maynooth Experience

Staff unanimously felt that one of the major strengths of the course is the fact that it is on campus and were keen to highlight the benefits of the on campus experience, *“they feel that they are part of a university, they get used to the library, all the technology and having to use it”* (5) and *“I think it’s very important, they realise that they are Maynooth University students. The library access is so important”* (10). Another comments, *“The strength of the course above anything else is the fact that it is on campus”* (7).

Another staff member spoke directly in terms of the benefits of the on campus experience in terms of progression, *“I think it’s hugely important, once they go on, they have adapted already, and transport, etc. is all sorted”* (8).

Some staff say that they recommend the day time RTL to students over the evening RTL for this very reason, believing that the day time students get more of a feel for what it is like to be a student at Maynooth University. Another staff member captures this wider sentiment when she shares *“they get the full college experience and they get settled on campus for afterwards”*. (10) In general, it is felt that the on campus experience enables students to quickly assimilate into university life, and encourages a sense of ownership and belonging,

I really like it when we bring them over in Renehan Hall, they call it Hogwarts, but you get to say to them, look this is yours, this belongs to you. That motivates them to keep them coming. They feel that they are part of a university. (5)

Comparatively, there was some ambiguity about some of the outreach (off campus) RTL programmes, being less successful than the on campus model. There were various reasons why staff felt this was. Some felt they were often too subject focused, rather than skills based,

The outreach at Newbridge and Leixlip, which were run through VEC’s was a bit messier, it was too subject focused, and less focused on academic skills, unlike what [the core tutors] did here. (3)

It was also felt that there were problems with external funding and with time pressures imposed by funders. One staff member staff felt that this put extra pressure on students and didn’t give sufficient time for personal development, which contributed to it being less successful than the on campus model.

Kilkenny, was funded externally and funders wanted the course completed in 3 months. What would happen is, we would start with 20 people on the course, and by the time 3 months was up, if we finished with 9 we were doing well. Now, the 9 that finished had an incredible standard of academic work. They were pushed

and pushed, but we lost a lot, whereas here, the standard is also excellent as well, a high level, but we don't lose as many people, because they have the time for personal development and that's the important aspect of it. (5)

The personal development aspect was seen as an important aspect of one of the more successful outreach programmes, namely, the Soilse project, which was awarded the 'NALA Ace award' in 2009. Comparing Soilse to Kilkenny, one staff member said, while they were both condensed into three-month courses, in Soilse, *"the supports were there, there was a lot more learning support"* he went on to describe Soilse as being, *"very holistic"*. (5)

7.4 Staff perspectives on student challenges and supports

Staff spoke about student challenges, naming their initial *"fear of the unknown"*, and fear of *"academia"* (9). Frontline staff such as those in administration spoke of some of the changes that have occurred over the years. As a first point of contact, administrators deal with enquiries from prospective students. One of the previous administrators for the RTL, who was also a past student of the RTL told us *"the whole system has changed, we no longer have to explain or recommend the course"*. She went on to say that in the past, they spent a lot of time explaining the language of university. Since then, one of the biggest changes they have seen is how people's knowledge of university has been shaped by their children's experience, *"when I started, nobody knew the language [of university], we had to explain what a semester was now this has changed because, "their kids went to college"* (9).

A small number of staff also told us how some of the RTL students can present with disabilities and particular challenges, such as dyslexia, etc. Despite the part time status of RTL students, the Disability Office has proved to be an excellent support for RTL students and tutors over the years. In recent years, three students who wheelchair users were supported by MAP. Core tutors told us how the first of these students and his assistant helped them to develop their *"awareness"* and the *"skills"* needed to *"meet his needs"*. Core tutors claimed that this experience, among others, encouraged them to continue *"broadening their scope"* in order to *"meet student needs"* and *"develop the course"* (1). In terms of RTL student progression, core tutors went on to say that they have developed a good working relationship with the Disability Office which *"serves the course and students well"* (1).

Speaking about the core tutor's contribution, one staff member said,

Both of the tutors are very tuned into the students, they are very quick to pick up if a student is struggling or if there is something else going on that is interfering with their participation on the course. (8)

Similarly, core tutors worked with the Inclusive Learning Initiative (ILI) and the RTL played a part in the fantastic results it achieved. The ILI was piloted in 2011, and was designed to support students with disabilities and learning difficulties to participate in higher education.⁵

7.5 Staff Opinion in relation to fees

Staff raised the fees an issue for RTL students. As one staff member said, *“the fees are a problem, there is no reduction for disabilities, etc.”* (10) Another said *“funding comes directly from student fees, they pay. It is an expensive course and there is no direct funding from the government”* (3).

Besides the issue of access and affordability, some staff questioned its competitiveness. One stated how, as it stands, the RTL is the most expensive part time certificate course of its type. This staff member notes how competitors are able to offer similar courses for less than the €1,000 current fee for the Certificate in Return to Learning. (See Section 3.5)

As mentioned previously (section 6.2.4) in relation to funding supports and fees, one staff member told researchers that, *“in my first 5 years the social gave 500 euro towards the course, then that stopped, that was a big thing”*. Another staff member told us that, *“the department of Social Protection used to fund level 5 courses, some students were lucky, but funding depended on their advisor in Social”*. He went on to say,

In my first year or two there was still a trickle getting it, but now not. The government are now funding part time, through Springboard, but part-time jobs-

⁵ The ILI Pilot scheme began with 4 students initially, and later in 2015 another 5 students were recruited. Two of the ILI students chose to do the RTL as their first year of study. The RTL tutors worked alongside ILI students and their support staff and mentors, doing *“ground breaking work”* and achieving great success (3). Speaking about the core tutors and the RTL's contribution to the ILI initiative, one staff member remarked that, *“the RTL was an incredible catalyst for students coming to university via ILI. It changed these students' lives”* (11). For more information on the ILI see, <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/news-events/inclusive-learning-initiative-ili-representing-ireland-investt-project-2015>

ready stuff, that's where the emphasis is, so social probably have their hands tied too. (5)

In light of the above statement, and the fact that attending a part time course can make you ineligible to receive certain benefits such as jobseekers allowance and jobseekers benefit, one staff member said,

I don't always recommend RTL because of fees, I often ask people, what's your funding situation? Are you on welfare? If they are on social welfare payment, I put them off the RTL, which is terrible, I don't want to do that, but it's a barrier. Not only do they have to come up with the 1000 euro, but they are also in danger of losing their social welfare entitlement. (7)

She went on to say how she would often recommend a full time Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS) in a local Further Education provider instead.

Another impact of the fee-structure that emerges in staff interviews is a sense of exclusion for those unable to raise fees for the programme. Thirteen percent (13%) of those to register do not complete the programme, this research was unable to determine reasons for non-completion, but staff interviews reveal strenuous efforts by some staff to source ad hoc financial supports from other sources.

While staff generally agree that the RTL is expensive, some staff members noted that DACE has successfully brought in a payment plan in 2016. The increase in the fees from €900 to €1,000 (2016), allowed DACE to successfully implement payment plans for students of the RTL programme, through the fees office. Participants can now pay the fees in instalments and arrange a personal payment plan with the Fees and Grants office.

7.6 Staff comments on the course curriculum

In relation to the curriculum, the core subjects English and the Classics were discussed, including how they are used as a vehicle to teach the core skills of research, essay writing, critical thinking etc. with one staff member telling us, “[tutor A] *teaches the classics and [tutor B] looks after the English, they bring the students through it and they all get something out of it, it's typical of adult education, left field*”. He goes on to say how,

I meet students at the beginning and they are nervous, and thinking, is this the right place for me? etc. and 6-7 months later, they are telling him how much James Joyce has influenced their life or the Gaelic revival on 1916, they piece things together. They are in a forum and have a chance to discuss with [core tutors] who love their subjects. (5)

The subjects, English and Classics are “*underpinned*” by the “*practical skills*” (5). One of the skills that stands out for this member of staff is the end of year project and presentations that students do,

They have great crack, they do presentations, with cheese and wine, a little sample! They present on something that they are passionate about and its real for them. It's not in the abstract, they get the academic stuff. This is what's concrete!

Continuing,

When I think about the projects that students come up with at the end of year, a water meter, with a fully working model and blue print, and the next one, the history of the Dubliners, which came in the in the form of an Album sleeve, plus the influence the band had in this woman's family. Really good academic research gone into it as well. (5)

Suggestions around the scope of curriculum design were made, with reference to the possibility of identifying parts of the RTL curriculum that could overlap with business/economics/law and could be used to create a broader pathway for student progression within Maynooth University,

There may be scope again around curricular design, parts of which are common e.g. essay writing, which you will meet in business here or law in fact. It might be possible to dovetail it to have one module on maths, ordinary level maths say. (6)

This point was echoed in another contribution as follows,

I'd like to see broader curriculum, it's all very dependent on [core tutors], and the two subjects that [core tutors] teach all the skills through, English and Greek studies, I'd love to see business, economics and law going in there also. (7)

Another important issue that arose during staff interviews in terms of curriculum design was the assessment methodology, with one staff member noting,

At the moment its essay based, so, students don't sit a terminal examination. So, are we preparing them well enough when they face an exam in Jan? Hypothetically you could have left school twenty years ago, never sat an exam, so it's something worth considering,

He went on to say that "I'm not involved with curriculum design, but it's something to think about" and asked if it was possible, "could it be 50-50 continuous assessment and exams"? (6)

The core tutors were not in favour of exams, and have strongly resisted previous attempts to introduce exam assessment methodologies, explaining,

We have always had the ethos that it's not just for people going into third level, 15 years ago a party came down from Trinity and wanted to impose exams on us, I don't know why, they didn't think there should be any access courses without exams, but we stuck our heels in, fairly, and said look, that's not really the point, we want everyone to be able to come in to the course and sample it and without that awful terror and the possible failure at the end. (1)

Asked if there was anything that staff found was lacking about the curriculum, one staff member who also works with RTL students who progress on to BA, said that despite the core tutor's best efforts, "referencing is something that always comes up" (8).

Another staff member remarked, "I would have recommended in the past, that some form of math's be brought in, and stats, as they come in under a lot of the arts degrees" and went on to say that currently, "they certainly have stats in there" (7). While maths is not taught on the RTL curriculum, they do receive a data module, with a staff member explaining, "it's called data, but it's really to start them thinking about where numbers come from in any assessment of stats or measurements", further describing it as, "critical thinking about numbers and measurement" (8).

Two staff members also mentioned that they would like to see a career development element added to the RTL, with one staff member stating,

There is also a part around career development and career aspirations, I'm not sure if it's being addressed? The certificate in science here is (I think), there is input from the careers officer on that". (6)

7.7 Staff thoughts on delivering the Certificate in RTL.

Outside of specific subject choices, three staff members brought up wider operational issues to do with curriculum, identifying a gap in the access route for subjects and potential students, with one stating,

If it's timely, if there is a review about what it is and where it should go, I feel there is certainly a market for this middle place, between humanities and science, which is your business, economics law, which probably we haven't got covered off. (6)

While staff overwhelmingly felt that a key part of the value of the RTL was the core tutors (section 7.2), this has also been presented as a possible disadvantage, as illuminated in the following staff comment, “*it needs funding, co-ordination, it happens every year because it is so successful, but I'm sure it's in jeopardy, it's going to change when those tutors go*”. This staff member went on to make a comparison between the RTL and Certificate in Science, saying,

Standalone science is working well, not sure if I want to change that. It's now being run and administered by science faculty and there is much more investment and buy in by the whole university, and I think the RTL needs that as well. (7)

7.7.1 Accreditation

As mentioned previously (section 1.1) the RTL is a level 5 course on the National Framework of Qualifications. Regardless of the current Level 5 status, staff who were ideally placed, feel that “*by the time learners finish, those that are successful have reached Level 7 or 8*” (1). From another, “*we have found that students who go on after, excel at level 7 and 8 which is high praise*” (5) with this staff member further commenting,

So, it's pitched at level 5 but by the time those students are leaving they are comfortable at level 7, very easily and level 8, they are there. It might have to do with the fact that [core tutors] have then for the full academic year. Sep – May.

The rationale behind the course's Level 5 positioning was explained to core tutors in the past, as to *"invite as many learners as possible and because of its preparatory course status"* (1). During interviews, one staff member suggested that it maybe timely to address this issue, *"in order to make sure it is pitched at the right level"* and that *"it is a good time to look at is it placed correctly on the framework"* (6).

7.7.2 Part time Structure

While most staff agreed that the part time structure was a vital part of the flexible solution for access of mature students, the part time structure brings with it other disadvantages in terms of funding and supports (see 3.3.1). One research participant explains, *"the fact that its part time, I would love to see a broader program, full time, less fees or no fees, and eligible for BTEA, that's how it works with the cert in science"* (7).

While interviewing staff, other issues relating to the part-time status of the course were highlighted, in particular its effectiveness over a full-time model. One staff member simply asked, *"are students suitably bridged with two mornings a week?"* and again *"is the intensity, of two mornings a week sufficient? This is where the data will help, we've certainly heard nothing but positive reports"* (6).

7.7.3 Morning & Evening Sessions

The two mornings and one evening sessions operate effectively as three separate student cohorts (see section 3.3). This structure is in place simply to facilitate students. Broadly speaking, people who are working during the day often enrol on the evening course, while parents with school-aged children often opt for the daytime course (section 7.2).

7.8 Suggestions for change

- Staff experience mirrors student experience in terms of the central role of the core tutors, for example through the comment “*The Tutors have been critical to the success of this*” and in terms of the on campus experience being an integral part of its success.
- Staff also felt that the adult education methodologies were an intrinsic part of the success of the RTL.
- Fees are regarded by some as a barrier to participation as they are expensive and uncompetitive with other institutions offering similar courses.
- IT Skills were mentioned as lacking on the RTL curriculum.
- A lot of hard work and networking has been done down through the years by the core tutors in terms of student supports. The unique relationships such as that with the library and its LIST skills is one example, and it is felt that it is important that effort is made to maintain these links.
- Some staff highlighted the fact that the potential access routes for business/economics and law were currently not being provided and would like to see this option being explored as part of any future reframing or review of the RTL.
- Some staff felt that the NFQ level 5 framework status needs to be examined, with all agreeing that students who successfully complete are at level 7-8. Tutors have in the past contested their level 5 status; (but it was explained to them that it is to invite as many learners as possible and was pre-entry)
- The part time, morning and evening structure has its advantages and disadvantages. It allows flexible access for non-traditional students including access to all student supports. However, it can be difficult for students, especially evening students, to access all services available to them.
- Return to Learning students do not fall under the remit of Maynooth University Access Programme due to their part-time status. In practice, there is a working agreement between RTL tutors and staff in Maynooth University Access Programme that supports students presenting with disabilities etc., but these supports are accessed informally. While some staff were in support of these operational procedures, others asked if the part time structure was enough to suitably address student needs?
- Some staff members felt that the current operationalisation of the RTL was too reliant on associate staff and should instead be more central to the core activities of the department

Chapter 8- Strengths, Impacts and Recommendations for the future.

Within chapter one of this report, four key research questions were identified as follows:

1. In what way does the Certificate in Return to Learning satisfy equality of access criteria?
2. What are the key experiences of students on the programme?
3. What are the progression, retention and performance rates at certificate, undergraduate, and postgraduate level?
4. What is the most sustainable model for the Certificate in Return to Learning in the future?

This final chapter draws from preceding chapters to answer each of these questions.

8.1 In what way does the Certificate in Return to Learning satisfying equality of access criteria?

As detailed within chapter four, the aim of the current National Access Plan 2015-2019 (HEA, 2015) is to support increased access to and participation within Higher Education for six main target groups. These are named as people with disabilities; mature students; students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; students progressing from Further Education; part-time students; and members of the Irish Traveller community. Additional sub-groups are also identified such as those who are parenting alone and what the HEA (2015: 4) describe as “vulnerable migrants”. The overall objective of Ireland’s national strategy on access is rooted in principles of equality and inclusion; objectives which connect with core principles associated with adult and community education more broadly.

The Certificate in Return to Learning is satisfying national access criteria, particularly in relation to the category ‘mature students’. Seventy-two percent (72%) of research participants that complete the online survey (see Appendix 1) self-identify as first-time, mature students and student records indicate that 75% of all RTL students are over 30 years of age. The Certificate in RTL is, at present not deliberately targeting students from lower-socio economic groups. Just 9% of those surveyed identified with this categorisation. Moreover, only 3% cite having a disability. No research participants identify as Irish Traveller. Four percent (4%) of those to participate in this research’s online survey hold a Further Education award.

Five percent self-identify as migrants, all of whom are second generation and who migrated from either the UK or another European nation. When this is compared to Maynooth

University's other Foundation Certificate in Science and Engineering, 25% cite a nationality other than Irish with 19% migration from countries outside of the European Union.

The certificate in Return to Learning satisfied national access criteria in relation to humanities, arts and social science options for further study. It does not offer a connection to science subjects, business, or law, each of which are also offered at undergraduate level at Maynooth University. Some work needs to be done to advise prospective students about alternative routes of entry such as through the Certificate in Science and Engineering at Maynooth University.

8.2 What are the key experiences of students on the programme?

In terms of models for access Foundation Certificates (FCs), the Certificate in Return to Learning is one of three approaches identified by Murphy (2009) namely a programme delivered by an individual Higher Education Institution (HEI) alone. Other possibilities are in partnership with another HE provider, or community based in collaboration with Colleges of Further Education. The fact that the certificate in RTL was carried out on campus, was cited as being extremely beneficial, an observation shared by staff involved with the programme also. This finding concurs with previous research by Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2015) when reviewing the MU Certificates in Science and Engineering.

Past-students report largely positive experiences with particular attention paid to praising two core tutors involved in the programme. Many of those interviewed made reference to the adult education methodologies that underpin the Certificate in Return to Learning namely a participatory, student-centred approach. These methods are thought to have significantly contributed to the formation of strong peer-relationships.

This research depicts the Certificate in RTL as an expensive option for access certificates when compared with other Foundation Certificates delivered across the Higher Education and Further Education sector. There are no government grants available for part-time study. Past-students had mixed opinions on the issue of fees. Some felt paying motivated them to complete the programme; others reported the struggle of making ends meet.

A central finding from this research relates to both student and staff experiences of the curriculum. Emergent themes are difficult to gauge as, over the evolution of the programme, many changes have organically emerged, often in response to student evaluations. Some dominant trends do emerge. Certain subjects were found to be especially beneficial namely core-skills, essay writing and reading skills; all of which laid important foundations for undergraduate study. Shortfalls were also named particularly a lack of subject choice and the absence of sufficient emphasis on IT skills. Amongst some staff interviews, there was a sense that the core tutors involved brought particular subject strengths. The benefits and pitfalls of written examinations emerged in both student and staff interviews. Some believed the opportunity to practice examination conditions was vitally important; others thought this was detrimental to their learning. Although there were mixed views on exam preparation, the research has highlighted that some students feel that those who go onto do degrees where exams are normal operating procedure, are not adequately prepared and this needs to be addressed somehow. Some specific suggestions for curricular change were made that would create potential for progression into business, economics and law. The importance of a strong career development element was also put forward.

Whilst students suggested both part-time and full-time options, the weight of staff opinion fell towards whichever model of delivery would enable students to access campus based student services and whichever model would ensure eligibility for state grants.

8.3 What are the progression, retention and performance rates at certificate, undergraduate, and postgraduate level?

This research reveals how 68% of those to register for the Certificate in Return to Learning successfully complete the programme. This is higher than the Maynooth University Certificate in Science and Engineering which recorded a completion rate of 62% (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015).

Sixty-six percent (66%) of all those to complete progress to under-graduate studies within Maynooth University. This is not the full picture of university progression as, within focus-group encounters, past-students presented who had progressed to other Higher Education Institutions (HEI) Over one-third (39%) of those to progress within MU progress to post-graduate studies with 9% (8 students) progressing to PhD studies.

Despite these high progression rates within under-graduate and post-graduate studies, one third (33%) of those to participate in the study's online survey are currently unemployed. This finding is of limited value as there are no comparative statistics available regarding employment levels prior to university study.

8.4 What is the most sustainable model for Certificate in Return to Learning in the future?

This final research question forms a framework for researcher recommendations in response to the study. These recommendations have been organised across five specific areas: to retain the strong adult education ethos; to address precarious staffing arrangements; to re-organise course structure and delivery, to rebrand and promote the programme and; to invest in future development of extended Foundation Certificate Access.

1. Position the FC in Return to Learning within the Maynooth University's strategic vision to broaden participation.

Maynooth University have a long tradition of supporting mature student entry and of seeking to wider participation into Higher Education. The Certificate in Return to Learning is an

important entry point for many mature students. However, its profile within the wider university is under-appreciated.

- (a) Ensure staff involved in programme implementation communicate the benefits of participation to the university executive and other stakeholders.
- (b) Carry out further research into FC access programmes in other universities (such as the Trinity Access Programme) to learn from their capacity to both promote their programmes to the general public, and fund their programme costs as part of wider university strategy.

2. Continued delivery from within the Department of Adult Education but strengthen relationships with Maynooth University Access Programme and with other Maynooth University Foundation Certificates.

A key success of the programme has been a commitment to a student-centred, participatory, democratic, hands-on approach to learning. It is important that these adult education principles are retained and are communicated across the wider spectrum of access delivery.

- (a) Continue delivery of the Certificate programme from the Department of Adult and Community Education.
- (b) Strengthen connections between this FC, other FCs in Maynooth University namely the Certificates in Science and Engineering, and future FC developments.
- (c) Appoint a working group that draws from the Access Office, Department of Adult and Community Education, Science and Engineering and the Turn to Teaching Access programme to oversee strategic development. This could include the development of a companion Access Certificate in Business and Law.

3. Ensure adequate terms and conditions of employment for core tutors responsible for course delivery.

At the moment core tutors employed to deliver the programme are employed as occasional staff members therefore paid for contact hours only and only for the duration of the programme

(September-May). The report recognises this model wasn't reported as problematic for the staff involved in programme delivery. To ensure sustainable future delivery:

- (a) Create clearer contractual arrangement with future course tutors that would embed the FC as a core activity of the department of Adult and Community Education.
- (b) Ensure those employed can take on a more recognised coordinating and developmental role in the management of the programme.

4. Re-brand and promote the programme across a variety of audiences.

Much recruitment into the RTL is through word of mouth and potential students researching educational options. These methods have served the programme well in terms of attracting sufficient numbers onto the programme; however they have been less successful in ensuring these students are drawn from across the population groups named within national access policy. Specific recommendations are:

- (a) Rename the Certificate in Return to Learning to a name that more clearly identifies its purpose. One possibility is to call it the *Foundation Certificate in Art, Humanities and Social Science*. This offers greater alignment with the existing Foundation Certificate in Science and Engineering and makes it clearer to potential students what progression pathways are open to them.
- (b) Strengthen connections with Further Education Colleges, Community Sector organisations and other civil society organisations working with target groups identified in the National Access Plan 2015-2019. Many of these relationships exist within the Department of Adult and Community Education and MAP, through its wider work with FE Colleges in particular. Greater linkage to a Foundation Certificate in Arts, Humanities and Social Science would capture those populations specifically identified as a national priority.
- (c) Strengthen connections within other departments in MU, for example the Department of Applied Social Studies, the Department of English and the Media Studies department. This could enhance strategic engagement in terms of recruitment and programme content.

5. Re-organise course structure, mode of delivery and course fee.

This recommendation requires a plan of action for future change that would support the following recommendations:

- (a) Re-orientate the programme for full-time delivery and incorporate a blended-learning approach that would retain the potential for students to attend classes for similar hours as the current part-time option. Students would thus be eligible for grant supports. Fees should be abolished for those eligible for the Back to Education Allowance.
- (b) Re-classify the certificate from level 5 to level 6. This would maximise progression from the Further Education (FE) and Community Education sector. This recommendation is in line with the national strategy on access through its potential to attract FE award holders.
- (c) Review programme contents to include a greater focus on e-learning and e-technologies and to include the potential for optional preparatory examinations.
- (d) Position the Certificate in RTL in parallel to other MU Foundation Certificate programmes such as the Certificate in Science and Engineering and future FC development (for example FCs in business and Law). Students on this programme could share core modules with those attending the FC in Return to Learning.
- (e) Establish an alumni, with the support of the alumni office to serve and support past students and nurture the strong sense of community that exists.

8.5 Researcher Final Comments

The RTL has delivered a successful arts-based pathway to over 900 students since its inception in 1992. Over the years, it has proved to be an invaluable resource to adult learners wishing to access higher education.

Fundamentally, a huge part of the RTL's success is the low-risk opportunity offered to adult learners hoping to take the first tentative steps within third level education. Once they have begun their journey, the concept of university is gradually demystified. This report suggests that adult learners not only require access to higher education, but they also want a choice of subjects that gives them the necessary skills to engage and at the same time enables wider future progression and genuine pathways towards higher education in humanities at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The success of the RTL has been mapped out statistically within in the report, in the form of completion and progression rates. A large number of student testimonials overwhelmingly attest to the strengths of the course, which combines a range of adult-centred, skills-based subjects and methodologies. This approach has enabled transformative experiences for many students, at academic, professional and personal levels.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Online survey

Return to Learning Review

Thank you for taking the time to consider this questionnaire. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the impact of the **Return to Learning Certificate (RTL)** at Maynooth University in terms of: student access; learning experiences; progression impacts; Adult Education teaching methods; and the role of the programme in university and higher education structures.

This survey will take about 10-20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire is designed as an accompaniment to focus-group meetings which seek to uncover people's experiences of the RTL, good and bad. As a result, the survey is mostly about measurements and the questions are short and to the point. Please fill in the questionnaire even if you are not able to make it along to one of the focus-groups. The **survey is anonymous** and is not linked to your name, email or any identifiable data.

Completed questionnaires will be stored in a secure place and will be destroyed upon completion of the research. For more information contact: Conor Magrath, Dept. of Adult & Community Education, NUI, Maynooth, e: conor.magrath@nuim.ie, ph. 0876339118. or Dr. Bernie Grummell, Dept. Of Adult & Community Education, NUI Maynooth e: bernie.grummell@nuim.ie ph. 017083761.

The first few questions asks about your entry into the programme

1. What year did you commence the Certificate in Return to Learning? · *Required*

- 1992
- 1993
- 1994
- 1995
- 1996
- 1997
- 1998
- 1999
- 2000
- 2001
- 2002
- 2003
- 2004
- 2005
- 2006
- 2007
- 2008
- 2009
- 2010
- 2011
- 2012
- 2013
- 2014
- 2015
- 2016
- 2017

2. What most motivated you to return to Education? · *Required*

Please select between 1 and 3 answers.

- To gain a qualification
- As a route to undergraduate education
- To secure a better job
- To improve my academic skills
- To challenge myself
 - To meet like-minded people
 - Other

2.a. If you selected Other, please specify: *Optional*

3. Before Commencing the RTL, what was your previous highest level of qualification?

· *Required*

- Primary education
- Junior/Inter certificate
- Leaving certificate
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Fetac/QQI level 3-6
- Degree
- Other

3.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

The next few questions are designed to give us a better sense of the socio-economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds of people who undertake the RTL certificate. It also asks about your current occupational identity⁴. The National Access Plan 2015-2019 identifies five target groups they hope to support in accessing Higher Education: Please indicate if any of the plan's descriptions match how you think about your own circumstances. · *Required*

- Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education
- First time, mature student entrants
- Students with disabilities
- part-time, flexible learners
- Further Education award holders
- Irish Travellers

5. At a European level, policies are being developed to create more diverse learning environments through the inclusion of more migrant learners. This includes people who have themselves migrated into Europe and also people who are second or third generation migrant. Can you please indicate if any of these descriptions match your experience · *Required*

- I migrated to Ireland as a child and have been educated through the Irish school system
- I migrated to Ireland as an adult
- I am born in Ireland to parents/grandparents who migrated to Ireland
- None of the above

5.a. If you answered yes to options 1-3, how would you describe your migrant background (e.g. what is your country of origin, how do you describe your own cultural identity). *Optional*

6. What did you do upon completion of the course? · *Required*

- I am currently a student on the RTL
- I was unable to complete the course
- I progressed to undergraduate study within Maynooth University
- I progressed to undergraduate study within another college or University
- I secured part-time employment
- I secured full-time employment
- I undertook voluntary work
- Unemployed I
- Other

6.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

7. If you subsequently undertook further study, what is the highest level qualification you attained? (If you are currently a student on the RTL, please skip this question)

Optional

- Diploma
- Degree
- Higher Diploma (H.Dip) / Postgraduate Diploma
- Masters (M.A / M.Sc)
- PhD
- Post- Doctorate

8. If you are currently employed, what is your occupation? (we realise that not everybody will be gainfully employed, if you are not currently working, please state, Unemployed) · *Required*

9. If I had not completed the Certificate in RTL, I would not be working in the job I am currently in. (If you are Currently a student on RTL, please skip this question)

Optional

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Not sure if I agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

10. If the RTL Certificate had been a full-time course, would you have attended/been able to attend? · *Required*

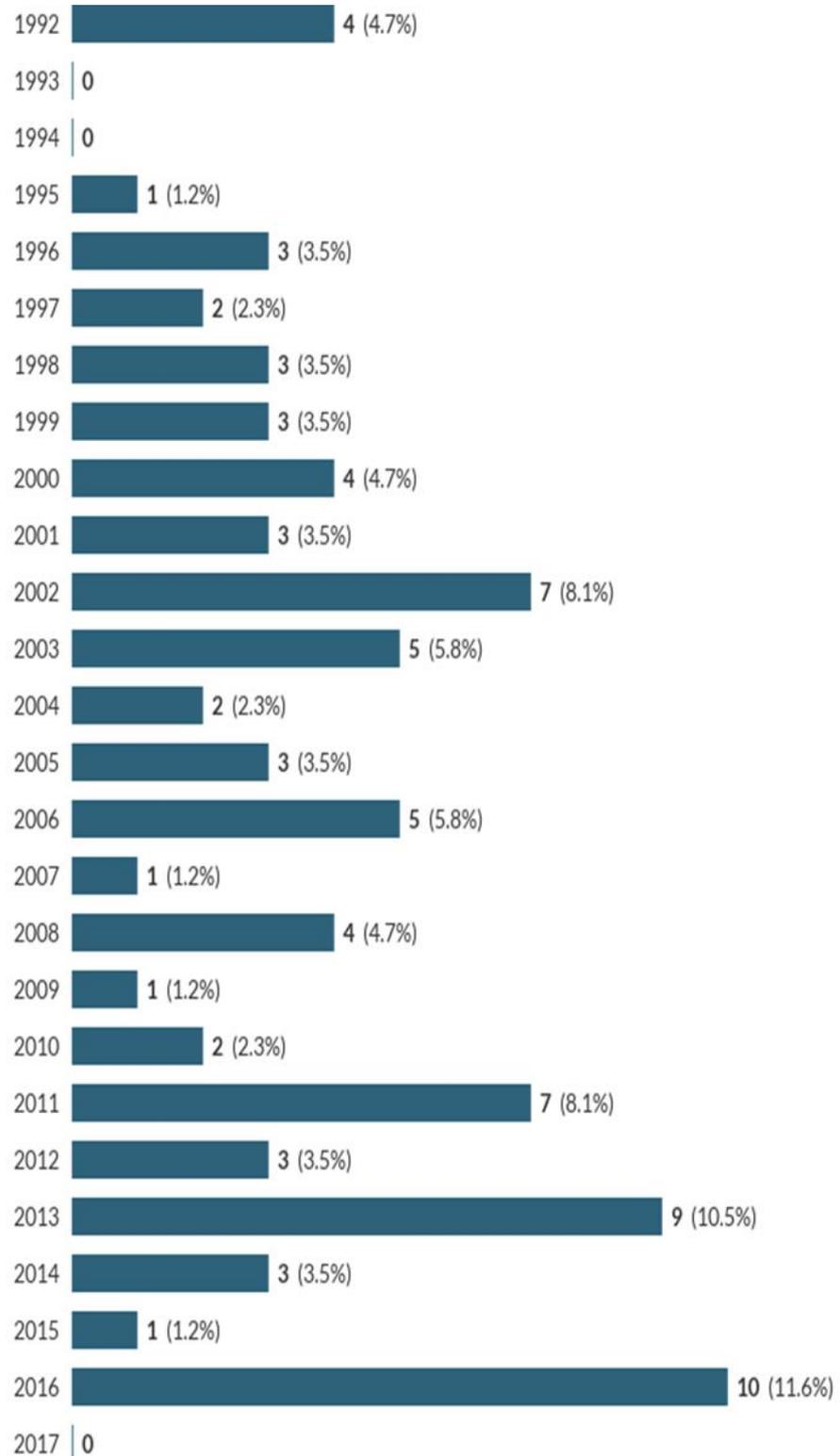
- Yes
- No

11. Please use the following section to add any comments or thoughts you may have about your experience on the RTL certificate and that you consider important to this research.

Thank you so much for your participation in this survey

If during your participation in this study 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 the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner

Appendix 2 – Past student completion of on-line questionnaire



Appendix 3- Student mail-out letter



Dear Past student,

Hello everybody, [core tutors] here from Return to Learning. We hope that you are all well and prospering. We have something with which we would like your help.

We are contacting you on behalf of The Department of Adult and Community Education(DACE) at the University to introduce Conor Magrath from the Department. He is conducting research on behalf of, but separate to, the Access Office. This is the first formal piece of research to be done on the Return to Learning Course (RTL), so we are very excited about it.

Conor is hoping to bring past RTL students together in groups to discuss their experiences as a student on the course, in a confidential setting. If you would rather not participate in a group discussion, you could talk to him on a one-to-one context (in person, phone or e-mail). The important thing is that you have an opportunity, if you want, to share your experience.

The purpose of this research is to discover:

- a) Why you, the student, chose the RTL Course in the first place
- b) Your experiences on the RTL programme
- c) To what extent the programme prepared you for what you did next.

Even if you did not complete the Course to Certificate, he would value your input. We hope you will all take part in this important piece of research.

The group discussions will take place on Thursday afternoon the 30th of March and on Friday morning the 31st of March. If you would like to participate but these dates don't suit you, please also get in touch and we will accommodate your involvement another way. If you would be interested in getting involved with this project, **please email Conor**, using the contact details below, before the end of March.

Although there will be no direct material benefit for your participation, your involvement will represent a central and important contribution to a review of the Return to Learning Certificate programme. We hope that you consider taking part in this important piece of research which will contribute to enhancing the experience for future students. You will be able to review the outcome of the research, when available, by consulting Maynooth University Access Programme page on the NUIM website: www.nuim.ie/access-office.

Finally, this email is being sent from Student Records as this is where all the information on past and present students is held. We have not shared any information with the researchers which reveals your identity or contact details. The researchers will only become aware of your personal identity if you choose to get in contact with them.

This report is a wonderful opportunity to get in touch with you all and we would love you to contribute to the research for RTL to establish its legacy.

Best wishes,

[core tutors]

Contact details

| |
|---|
| <p>Researcher:</p> <p>Conor Magrath Conor.Magrath@nuim.ie</p> |
| <p>Advisory Research Group members:</p> <p>Dr. Brid Connolly, Dr. Bernie Grummell, Dr. Camilla Fitzsimons and Dr. Derek Barter</p> |
| <p>Researchers and Advisory Group based at:</p> <p>Department of Adult and Community Education Education House North Campus National University of Ireland, Maynooth Maynooth, Co. Kildare</p> <p>Phone: (01) 7083761</p> |
| |

Appendix 4- Survey and Focus Group Invitation email

Dear past student,

Thank you for your email. I am delighted you are interested in taking part in the **Review of the Return to Learning Certificate (RTL)** at Maynooth University. We are conducting an online RTL Past-Student Questionnaire which is designed as an accompaniment to focus-group meetings which seek to uncover people's experiences of the RTL, good and bad. The Survey is **open to all Past students**, so please fill in the questionnaire even if you are not able to make it along to one of the focus groups.

The **survey is anonymous** and is not linked to your name, email or any identifiable data.

Survey Link: <https://maynoothuniversity.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/return-to-learning-review>

In Addition, as part of the research programme, we are carrying out a number of **Focus Groups** at the end of this month. These sessions are aimed at gathering information about your experience of the course, your motivations for doing it, and your experiences after the programme (I would be interested in hearing to what extent the programme prepared you for what you did next). Focus groups will be held on campus, they will last approximately one hour, and we will of course provide tea and coffee.

If you are available and interested in attending a focus group, **please can you indicate by return email**, which of the following sessions you would like to attend:

- 11am Thursday 30 March (room SE234)
- 7pm Thursday 30 March (room SE010-L5)
- 11am Friday 31 March (room SE236)
- 7pm Friday 31 March (room SE010-L5)

For those of you who are unable to attend but are doing the Survey, thank you for your valued input. For those of you who are attending a focus group, rooms are booked in the new School of Education building. Click [here](#) for map and I look forward to meeting you and hearing about your experiences.

Kind regards,

Conor Magrath.

Appendix 5- Ethical approval

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,
MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

16 December 2016

Dr Camilla Fitzsimons
Adult and Community Education
Maynooth University

RE: Application for Ethical Approval for a project entitled: Review of Return to Learning Programme

Dear Camilla,

The above project has been evaluated under Tier 1 rapid review process and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 31 December 2017.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Carol Barrett".

Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary,
Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

| |
|------------------------------------|
| Reference Number SRESC-2016-097 |
|------------------------------------|

Appendix 6- Focus group questions

What were your motivations and reasons for choosing the Return to Learning Cert at Maynooth?

- What were your experiences of being a student on the Return to Learning Cert programme?
- What was your experiences after the programme?
- To what extent did the programme prepare you for what you did next?
- What would you regard as the strengths of the programme?
- What did/do you feel were/are the challenges for students on the Cert?
- Based on your own experience, what do you think are the main barriers to participation for adults returning to Further and Higher Education?
- What needs to be changed or developed further?
- Are there any important questions you feel have not been asked, or anything else you would like to add or feel should be included?

Appendix 8- Student testimonials

Online Survey;

The [core tutors] had great respect for the group of learners and encouraged each individual to meet their full potential, they had the ability to teach in a way which included the whole group even though we had different capabilities

Very positive course and supportive tutors

Best thing I ever did. I will never be the same again. The course was given by two great women.

I am most grateful to [core tutors], they were a wonderful team.

They were the perfect tutors also, patient and personal. This definitely helped.

Just that [core tutors] were fabulous and instrumental in my success

I will forever be in debt to [core tutors] for what they have enabled me to achieve in the academic world and beyond.

The encouragement and assistance I got from [core tutors] made a huge difference.

It was invaluable and I continue to remember it and especially the 2 facilitators with fondness and appreciation

The [core tutors] are amazing women as they provide a very unique environment where mature students can blossom and gain the skill for further education. Return to Learning was the best course I ever did and gave me the skills to do a degree and Masters. I will be forever grateful to both these women. They gave me the wings to fly as such and I now work with 3rd level students and also promote 3rd level education to Leaving cert students and Mature throughout the county. I couldn't recommend more highly the Return to Learning course at Maynooth. But I do think a bit of money and time should be spent on promoting it as a lot of people are not aware of it. For example, giving talks to matures who may be doing leaving cert subject of adult course. Let me know if you need any help with that as it is my area!!

Course experience;

I couldn't recommend it highly enough. It gives people a springboard to the confidence in their ability and introduces them to the previously daunting world of further education. RTL made a difference to my life.

It was a brilliant course that prepared me for many new aspects of college life. I was familiar with the college IT system, the library and had a chance to sit in on some of the lectures which greatly helped me in choosing my modules. I felt I was ahead of the game at the outset and even in third year some of the non RTL students are learning writing techniques that we practised on our RTL course

The RTL course was the best thing I ever did. It gave me the confidence to go to on to further study which led to my present job which is the job of my dreams.

My time on the course was a very positive and beneficial experience, and directly led to the success I'm currently enjoying as an undergraduate.

I enjoyed every minute of my time on RTL and hope to progress to 3rd level next Sept. if I had not completed RTL I am in no doubt that I would have been woefully ill prepared to embark on a degree course and most likely would have dropped out.

My experience was a very positive one and gave me the tools and support necessary in researching and writing up on that research. This, I felt, was very important for me later when I pursued a degree full time.

On the whole it has been one of the most positive experiences of my adult life. I hope to have secured a degree place for the next academic year and the skills learned on RTL will help me hit the ground running.

*Excellent stepping stone for further education, brilliant course for confidence building
The RTL course helped me gain the confidence and skills I needed to go onto continue my studies.*

The RTL course was a wonderful way to get back into study after a long absence from formal study. I found it very helpful for brainstorming essays and referencing and writing bibliographies. Doing the project was most useful for doing research.

It was interesting and encouraging and it whetted my appetite to carry on with my studies.

i met the wonderful [core tutors] whose hard work in preps and cheerful enthusiasm carried me along with them. I developed a keen interest in history which i still enjoy and an ability to write in short sentences to make a point.

FOCUS GROUP COMMENTS;

I was in my early fifties when I finished college, so I really didn't want a new career, I went back and I worked for another ten years, but it changed my life going to college, I would never ever have the confidence I have to day, as an individual, if I hadn't come in here, if I hadn't done the return to learning and that was a massive stepping stone and then going on to college. I have been grateful ever since.

Appendix 9- Staff testimonial

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, MAYNOOTH
MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND

FACULTY OF ARTS - DÁMH NA NEALAÍON
Dean: Dr Peter Denman,
Secretary: Dr Thomas O'Connor



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

Ms Anne Rowntree and Ms Margaret Sweetman,
Department of Adult and Community Education.

copy

20 June 2006

Dear Anne and Margaret,

I've just come to the end of another round of interviewing applicants for "Mature Student Entry"; as usual there was quite a few coming fresh from your Return to Learning course. And this year I'm actually doing what I've intended to do (but didn't) in previous years, and am writing to let you know just how excellently prepared I find the students coming off your course. When someone presents with your RTL programme completed, I can be confident that they are a very strong prospect for entry. Perhaps even more impressive, however, is that your students invariably speak in glowing terms of the experience of working with you both, - and, as well as the learning experience itself, that aspect of enjoyment is also an important part of preparing for third-level study. In the nature of things, we see applicants from a number of preparatory programmes of various kinds and intensity, and on the basis of what I've seen I would judge the course you teach to be the best of them. Whenever we get students applying who have potential but are as yet unprepared for third-level study, it is a great resource to be able to direct them confidently towards your course in the knowledge that - whatever they might think at the outset - they will end up finding the course rewarding and the very opposite of a wasted year. So, thank you both for all that you do.

Yours sincerely

Peter Denman,
Dean of Arts

c.c. Professor Anne Ryan, Dept of Adult and Community Education
Mr John McGinnity, Assistant Registrar, Admissions Office.

Appendix 10- Letter From husband of deceased Student

Hi Conor,

I received the letter to my wife concerning the DACE research. I'm replying for your and NUIM's information. Unfortunately, Ann died in September 2012. I do know that Ann would have been delighted to have helped with your research as she had a great appreciation of the Return to Learning course and also had the highest regard for [core tutors]. Please let them know this and that the course was crucial in her further education and that she became a kind of missionary for Return to Learning. Regarding your research the following may be helpful.

Ann had been living independently in a bedsit and working full time to support herself since the age of about fifteen. She had little more than primary education. Ann was a bright person and found this very frustrating. Having married and had two children she developed breast cancer in the mid-nineties. As a result of the effects of her treatment Ann had been too ill to do much outside our home. Eventually, when she felt strong enough, she decided to apply for the Return to Learning course in Maynooth.

Ann found the experience a bit daunting at first but as time passed she found it exhilarating and very satisfying. I know this because when she returned home Ann discussed the day's doings with me and always spoke very warmly of [core tutors]. She really blossomed and was full of enthusiasm. Ann knew that she was being helped to satisfy a deep need. Ann was delighted that as a result of doing the course she interviewed for and was accepted to study for a BA in NUIM, which she did successfully. Ann then went on to achieve a baccalaureate in St. Patrick's College. Maynooth. When Ann's cancer returned she was considering studying for an MA but, as things turned out she didn't have the opportunity.

As a result of the Return to Learning course I saw a woman with a lot of potential grow in confidence, ability and achievement. At a personal level, as I said, Ann truly blossomed. Had she had better health and more time Ann would have used her growth and education to make a big contribution to society. I don't know if the above is useful or even relevant to your research, hopefully it is, anyway, I wish you the best with the project.

Regards,

██████████