M. Ed Adult and Community Education

Student Name   Lisa Hennessy

Student Number   16708999

Student Email   lisa.hennessy.2017@mumail.ie

Module Code   AD610

Assignment Title

"I didn't know it was going to be such a life changing experience"

An inquiry into the experiences and impacts of higher education on a group of mature students

Date   30th June 2022

"I didn't know it was going to be such a life changing experience"

An inquiry into the experiences and impacts of higher education on a group of mature students

By

Lisa Hennessy

Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Adult and Community Education (M.Ed.)

Department of Adult and Community Education

Maynooth University

June 2022

Supervisor: Dr Fergal Finnegan

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to all the staff in the Department of adult and community education at Maynooth University. Your enthusiasm for education is something that has stood out for me. The support you gave me along the way is much appreciated. I have enjoyed every minute of my learning journey from the start of my BA in 2016 to where I am now completing my M.Ed.

I owe particular thanks to my supervisor Dr. Fergal Finnegan; you have encouraged me along the way and shared your expertise with me for which I am grateful.

I would also like to thank the graduates that participated in the research, your story has been central to my research. This could not have happened without your willingness to take part.

To the rest of my M.Ed. class, you have made this whole experience more enjoyable with your friendship.

Special thanks to my parents who have endured my requests for silence and have supported me along the way.

Also, to my son Tyler a constant source of inspiration.

And finally, to my friends and wider family, thank you for offering support along this journey. I look forward to spending more time with you all once again.

Abstract

This thesis set out to explore how a group of mature students experienced and were impacted by completing a BA at Maynooth University. The aim of my study was to highlight the experiences of mature students in higher education with a particular focus on the non-academic experiences. This research was underpinned by my own experience of completing a BA as a mature student at Maynooth University and my experiences of working as an educator for twenty years. I am keenly interested in how students experience education. Because of this the student voice was central to my research.

For this research I used an inductive approach where I built my argument using data from national and international experts who are interested in the mature student experience in the adult education field and the data that emerged from the voices of the seven students that participated in the interviews. I decided from the outset that it was important to interview graduates that were at least two-years post-graduation, so they had time to reflect on their experience. I applied a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. I thought this approach suited best as although I had certain questions to ask, but I also wanted the freedom to explore other avenues if needed.

The themes that arose from the findings were economic realities, effect on personal well-being, significant learning about the self and society, and social connections. The findings also suggest apart from the academic credentials gained, mature students benefit in many other ways such as, gaining confidence, making friends, and finding their voice. Although each participant reported being 'stressed' at some stage during the BA each of them seen their experience as positive overall.

I hope my research will give a broader understanding of how mature students experience education and what non-academic gains they can get along the way.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction

This research seeks to explore the experiences and impacts of higher education on a group of mature students who completed a BA at Maynooth University. I will use a qualitative approach for this study using semi structured interviews to gain information about the mature student experience. My research has a focus on the non-academic impacts and experiences.

I interviewed seven graduates of the BA. Their interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analysed for themes. This was then all brought together in the discussion chapter to compare against the themes in the literature review.

While a lot of worthwhile research has been done on non-traditional students from working class backgrounds returning to education, such as Finnegan & Merrill's (2017) 'We're as good as anybody else', and Graham's (2015) Re-engaging with education as an older mature student'. I feel there are other demographics in society that return to education that are not investigated as much.

The Community studies BA group is made up of a diverse mix of mature students from different socio-economic backgrounds, geographical locations, age categories, and course expectations. The sample from the BA that I interview will give a new insight into how a group of mature students from varying backgrounds experience higher education. Even though the students are a diverse group the one thing in common is that they have 'experienced' is returning to education and completing a BA. I expect the diversity of this group to enhance my findings and give new insight into what types of mature students are out there and how there are impacted by returning to education.

Overview of Study

The reason I chose this topic is down to my own experience of higher education as a mature student and because I have worked in the field of education for almost twenty years. As a student, I can truly say that returning to education has been a transformative experience for me. As a teacher I have remained curious as to how my students experience education and how it impacts on their lives beyond school. I have a keen interest both personally and professionally in regard to hearing the student voice. I am open to hearing, the positive, negative, and unexpected experiences of mature students in higher education.

As a past graduate of the BA, I cannot ignore my own experience. I know how this has impacted on my life. For me completing the BA has been a 'transformative learning experience', I feel it has enhanced my social, economic, and cultural capital and it has made me aware of the institutional structures that maintain the status quo in society. I want to find out if the participants in the research have had similar experiences. Returning to education has given me the tools to construct a new perspective of the world around me. It has made me more critically aware of inequalities and has given me the language to discuss them on a broader stage. I feel that what I say holds more value because I have a third level qualification. Whether I have been transformed or not is probably debatable. Transformation is such a powerful word I am not sure if I can use it to fully describe my learning journey. On a personal level it has given me confidence, more autonomy in my life, new friendships, and I have gained a better understanding of myself. In some ways I describe my experience of returning to education as giving me a 'licence' to be the version of me that I wanted to be.

Of course, not everyone has had the same experience. I also have to be conscious of the negative impacts that I have experienced and come across in the literature such as the financial and time pressures, lack of family support and the many 'risks' that adults take on when returning to education As a researcher I must be able to 'identify my own assumptions and put them aside so that my research is not automatically shaped by these' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.9). When trying to make sense of the findings I had to ensure that the participants information is not influenced by my own opinions or experience. I did this by going in with an open mind, willing to hear both sides of the story. I didn't want my experience of the BA to influence how I interpret the findings. Other students may have different experiences I was open to hearing these. When writing up my findings I was careful not to overlook or misinterpret any findings that I didn't agree with.

Structure of thesis

In this first chapter I have outlined my research question and why I chose to study that area. Chapter two looks at the current literature on adults returning to education. I have broken the chapter into different sections. I will start off with a section on the context of what is currently happening in Ireland with regards to mature student education. This will then be followed by the main themes that arose from the literature that are relevant for my enquiry. These are financial pressures, personal development, and social capital. Chapter three will explain the

methodologies that I used for my research. Chapter four will outline my findings, motivation to learn, significant learning about the self and society, financial pressures, personal development, social connection. Chapter five will discuss the findings in relation to the literature outlined in chapter two. Chapter six will outline my overall conclusion to the research and recommendations for further research.

Conclusion

This chapter gave an introduction into my research study. I outlined my research questions, the rationale of my study, the key themes, the methodologies used and why I deemed them to be the most suitable.

Chapter 2 Literature review

Introduction

This literature review will discuss current literature pertaining to my research topic, how a group of mature students experienced and were impacted by higher education. Studying a mixed group such as the BA group will give insight into how different types of people experience returning to education. It is important to hear their story. Based on my own experience I am keenly interested both personally and professionally in research that captures the full range of experiences of these students.

For this research I used an inductive approach where I built my argument using data from national and international experts in the adult education field such as Merrill, Field, Finnegan, and Schuller and the voices of the students that participated in my research. Creswell & Clark (2007, p. 23) describe the inductive researcher as someone who works from the 'bottom-up, using the participants' views to build broader themes and generate a theory interconnecting the themes'. It was important for the 'student voice' to remain central to my research.

Through my research I have found that a lot of the current literature around mature students' academic experiences such as, Desjardins (2010), HEA (2021), seem to focus on participation, outcomes and widening access. Schuller et al, (2004, p.4) state that 'too much focus has been on 'what might be called the input and the process aspects, to the neglect of outcomes other than examinations passed or qualifications gained'. Fleming & Murphy (1997, p.18) also found that researchers have focused on 'access, motivation, reasons for participation and success rates, rather than finding out how mature students experience higher education'. As Schuller (2004, p.5) notes:

> Results and participation rates are easy to measure, we can analyse these results without viewing the other factors that could influence ones outcome. These statistics are often bandied about without looking at the quality of the student experience or what actually happens to the students as a result.

In 'College Knowledge' Fleming & Murphy (1997, p.18) reported three major themes relating to mature students experience, financial issues, relationships and external commitments and the learning process. Recent literature points to much the same, one has to wonder what if anything has changed over the last twenty-five years. This literature review will respond to some of the above themes in the present-day context.

The first part of the literature review will look at the context of what's happening in the area of mature students returning to education in Ireland at present. In this section I will review current literature in the area and policy documents. Government and EU research such as the Indecon report (HEA, 2021) that refer to the economic benefits of adults returning to education such as, increased employment, a more skilled workforce, these are important, but I believe there is more to learning than this which I will explore below.

In the second part I will review the common themes that emerged from the literature review. I found four key areas for discussion, financial pressures, personal development, social capital, and transformative learning. I came across these by largely looking at adult education literature in relation to the mature students experience of higher education

Context

What's happening in Ireland?

Widening participation of non-traditional students in Higher Education has been a goal of the Irish Government for many years. They view it as 'crucial to future economic development and the pre-eminent space for enhancing 'human capital' and ensuring that Ireland remains a highly competitive knowledge economy' (Finnegan et al. 2017, p.121). Governments hoped that an educated population would lead to a more skilled workforce and help grow the economy.

Tuition fees at third level were abolished in 1996 to increase participation and make higher education accessible to the growing young population at the time. In a report by the OECD (2004, p.56) it clearly stated that the 'free fees policy has not had the effects that were hoped for in improving participation from students from disadvantaged backgrounds'. The National Office of Equity of Access was established in 2003. This led to an increase in grants, bursaries, and access programmes at third level. These targeted students that traditionally didn't access third level education. There was an increase in participation levels in higher education across all age cohorts and the percentage within the 25-44 years old age cohort has surpassed 50 percent (HEA, 2021, p,ii). But this increase was not evenly spread. While increased participation would seem like positive thing across the board. There are certain demographics that are still missing out on educational opportunities. In 2014 despite increased participation

the HEA (cited in Fleming et al. 2017, p.30) note that 'economic inequality continues to have an enormous influence on participation rates and students of all backgrounds face considerable obstacles to attending third level education'. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (also known as the National Access Plan or NAP's) was set up to target four groups, people from disadvantaged areas, people with a disability, Irish Travellers, and lone parents. These groups 'recorded lower educational attainment levels than the national average' (HEA, 2021, p.iii). Many mature students fall into one of the NAP's four target groups.

Despite the supports being in place, some students still see higher education as not for them. The 'target groups' such as young people from semi and unskilled families, have fallen since '2004 where it stood at 10.8 per cent to 8 per cent' (HEA, 2008a cited in Fleming et. al. 2017, p.31). One could say the 'equality of opportunity' approach is not working. People are not all starting from the same level. Instead, we need a 'equality of condition' approach which is 'not about trying to make inequalities fairer or giving people a more equal opportunity to become unequal but ensuring that everyone has roughly equal prospects for a good life' (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p.132). The policies put in place must recognise the sometimes-complex life situations that both traditional and mature students have to cope with.

The rate of participation of mature students in higher education rose from 5 per cent in 1998 to a peak of 13.6 per cent in 2010' (HEA, 2021, p.10). This peak was at the height of the recession. As the economy recovered it is noticeable that the numbers of mature students attending third level courses dropped, the numbers had declined to 9 per cent of total new entrants by 2018/19. One has to wonder why this is. Firstly, as more and more of the population attended higher education the pool of mature students to draw from has become smaller, the Indecon report shows that 'the number of individuals aged 25-64 in the Irish population without a higher education qualification declined in the decade to 2019' (HEA, 2021, p.14). Secondly the increase grew over the years when the Irish economy was in recession, there was little employment, and many seen higher education as an opportunity to increase their employability. As the economy began to open up again and the economy recovered many students who would have traditionally fallen into the 'mature student' categories realised that they could get a job easily that paid well. People seen work as a faster route than education to more financial stability. A National Access Plan (NAP) (HEA, 2021 p.iii) progress review notes that

> 'The decline in the mature student participation coincided with 'a period of economic recovery and labour market reactivation that was not foreseen when the targets for the

NAP were being set up and this may be an influencing factor in the declining number of mature students'

Despite the changes in the economy, it's worrying that returning to education still wasn't seen as a viable option for mature students. Financial barriers remain one of the main barriers to mature students accessing higher education. The Indecon report (HEA, 2021, p. 27) found that '48 percent of respondents identifies finances as a major barrier'. Kearns (2017, p.180) found that 'mature students are far more likely to be deterred by the financial consequences attached to taking up full-time third-level education compared with their younger counterparts' this report also identifies 'other especial risks associated with for a return to study for this group'.

Mature students need flexibility many have to work part-time while studying as they have family commitments. Others identified the lack of part-time courses as a barrier to returning to education. This means they are not able to access supports such as the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) which is only granted to students on a full-time course. Mature students who enrol on full-time courses also face challenges as they are less likely to be awarded the SUSI grant. They have 'almost three times the rate of refusal compared to under 23-year olds' (HEA, 2021, p.41).

Most mature students have more responsibilities' than the typical student. Life can be complex, and half of the NAP respondents identified 'family responsibilities and commitments as a barrier' (HEA, 2021, p. vii). A more 'flexible' approach to higher education is needed to make it more appealing to mature students. Flexible learning pathways was defined by the UNESCO Education 2030 Agenda as 'multiple entries and re-entries into education at all ages', students benefit from this flexibility as they have 'greater choice in education as they can adapt career pathways and study pathways to their particular situations' (UNESCO, 2018).

Some students previous negative experiences of education can still impact them into adulthood. Others after a long absence may lack the confidence to return to education. Merrill & Alheit cited in Kearns (2017, p.181) point to the 'fragile nature of some mature students 'education biographies' which can lead to doubt their academic ability in their ability to cope in third level. Jenkins et al cited in Field (2012, p, 3) found that there were uncertain returns for adults who achieved their degree in working life, it had 'no apparent impact on earning levels' and those who 'achieved a degree later in working life had lower incomes than those who achieved their degree on leaving school'. Going to third level in Ireland still seems beyond reach for many, it's not a straightforward process.

What are third level institutions doing to increase participation?

Many universities across Ireland recognise the challenges faced by mature students in accessing higher education and have established access programmes to increase participation. Programmes such as Trinity College's Access Programme and Maynooth University's MAP's programmes, which I will outline below have all worked hard to widen the student population and to try make higher education accessible to all.

Maynooth University has a long history of supporting non-traditional students entering higher education. It runs a range of programmes such as the 'Return to Learning' certificate which helps students prepare for studying at third level. It established the Maynooth Access Programme (MAP) in 1998. It's main aim is to 'Encourage under-represented groups to consider Higher Education as a real option and provide access routes and post entry supports' (Maynooth University, 2022). Maynooth University's MAP's students 'compromise 24.1 percent of the overall full time undergraduate student body and MAP entrants compromise 28.8 percent entrants of all new undergraduate entrants in 2020-2021' (Maynooth university, 2022). It supports groups that are underrepresented in the typical university student population such as those from working class backgrounds, students with disabilities, mature students, members of the travelling community and those from minority ethnic groups. The four pillars of MAP are:

Community Outreach – Promoting the MAP programme on campus at open days and off campus, visiting education fairs and exhibitions. Visits to DEIS schools and adult education providers.

1. Pathways to University - Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) for applicants from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and entry routes for mature student access and those coming from QQI.
2. Transition to Maynooth – Summer programmes, Launchpad, an orientation programme which helps HEAR, and DARE applicants to adapt to university life by linking them up with MAP ambassadors which act and role models and mentors to the incoming students.
3. Supports for students – Access student advisory, academic advisors, assistive technology, needs assessments for students with disabilities, examination

accommodations, educational support workers, one to one learning support, and help with campus accommodation.

The above is just an example of what supports Maynooth University has in place for non-traditional students. All third level institutions in Ireland have spaces allocated for mature entrants and on campus supports. On the surface this sounds great. But to dig deeper, it's not just a matter of applying. While some HEI's guarantee entry such as TU Dublin others such as Trinity College 'expect students to compete with other mature applicants for what are referred to as "reserved places" (Loxley et. al., 2017, p.93). These quotas can however be used as another barrier for non- traditional students. Putting a cap on the number of places available is still discriminatory and students also have to compete for their places on the course. Students also have to fill in lengthy application forms along with their CAO application. Hear applicants are expected to write a statement about how their 'biography has affected their educational careers' (Loxley et.al., 2017, p.92). Mature applicants are required to fill in a 'quite detailed biographical as well as educational information' (Loxley et.al., 2017, p.93). These serve as another institutional barrier that these non-traditional students have to overcome, which traditional students do not have to provide. Access programmes have good intentions, but they still create barriers for students to overcome. Finnegan (2017. p.113) states that 'access is seen as part of an attempt to minimise disadvantage or exclusion rather than one strand in a wider programme to effect substantive change in conditions and outcomes'. There has to be a more straightforward way which supports equal access to higher education.

What's happening at government level?

The HEA and the DES have set out to reform Irish higher education by setting up the 'National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030' it sets out a 'new vision for HE in Ireland involving a more flexible system, with greater choice of provision and modes of learning'. (Fleming et.al. 2017, p.29). As of now very little flexible provision has been made. The strategy also sets out to increase diversity of the student body; improve the quality of teaching and learning, increase the relevance of learning outcomes; ensure that HE addresses wider social and economic needs that translate into high value jobs and real benefits for society (DG EAC, 2015, cited in Fleming et al. 2017 p. 29). A lot has been done but we are still below the targets we set out. Ireland's 12.6 percent lifelong learning rate (HEA, 2021, p.16) is lower than that of a number of

European countries. For example, 'more than one in three Swedes' (HEA, 2021, p.16) report some education and training over the same period. We are falling behind our target of 15 percent, set out for the 15 percent by 2025 in National Skills Strategy (HEA, 2021, p.16).

We cannot ignore those who are being left behind who are unable to manoeuvre through our complex higher education system. More needs to be done to increase participation rates for non-traditional students and those identified by NAP's. The policy makers at government level and those who work in the area of promoting equality of access in higher education are seeing the issue from two different perspectives. 'Access is seen as part of an attempt to minimise disadvantage or exclusion rather than one strand in a wider programme to effect substantive change in conditions and outcomes' (Finnegan et al. 2017, p.113). There has to be changes across the board. In order to increase participation of non-traditional students Finnegan identifies the importance of firstly learning how 'they' experience higher education. He mentions that there is a lack of qualitative research around non-traditional students. Quantitative research can only tell us so much. 'It has a tendency to reduce and therefore trivialise both what is complicated and what is perceived to be complicated by participants in a social setting' (Scott 2010, cited in Finnegan et. al. 2017, p.120). It cannot 'measure' the rich information that comes from qualitative research. Of course, it is time consuming and does not bring immediate answers, but with considered analysis I believe we can get a better overview of what is out there and how to improve it. I believe my research can give a good insight into the mature student experience by using their voice as my data. Achieving greater equality is, *has* to be, a slow process, which is more or less understood as a greater degree of fairness and widening opportunities for participation (Finnegan et.al, 2017, p.113).

Mature students have different needs and experiences to traditional students. This need not necessarily be viewed from a negative stance. Mature students bring a wealth of experience to any educational setting. Their voices need to be heard. A different approach needs to be implemented in supporting their return to education. Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) need to 'recognise that access, participation, and success for older and minority groups remains dependant on the HEI's adapting to the needs of a changing student body in Higher Education (Kearns, 2017, p.193). By focusing on simply raising participation policy makers are overlooking adult education practices such as alternative pedagogical approaches that support and encourage the mature student, student participation in the development and assessment of curriculum, and the recognition of the importance of the student voice in the classroom.

Financial Pressures

One of the recurring themes in the literature is how one's finances can impact on the choice to and how one experiences education. Despite the widening of access and increased participation, financial constraints remain one of the prevailing barriers for students. Students that are eligible for the SUSI grant find that they can't live on that alone. In research by O' Riordan and Lynch (1998, p.472) it was found that students viewed the grant system as 'neither adequate to cover the direct costs of participation, nor the opportunity costs from loss of earnings'. It also influences how they 'experience' education. O' Riordan and Lynch (1998, pg.472) also found that 'economic constraints also affected students learning': firstly, because they had to supplement the family income through work; and secondly, because they often lacked the basic accommodation and facilities for study'. In Fleming & Murphy's 'College Knowledge', financial issues arose as one of the three major issues relating to mature student experience. Lynch (cited in Fleming & Murphy, 1997, p. 19) found that 'lack of adequate financial resources was the main difficulty experienced by full-time mature students'. One has to wonder how much has changed over the twenty-five years since 'College Knowledge' was published.

Many mature students enter higher education with a 'degree of uncertainty surrounding the financial commitment and eventual return on their investment' (Kearns, 2014, p.95). Returning to education as an adult can bring benefits but nothing is guaranteed for many it can lead to 'further uncertainty and risk' (Field, 2006, p.1). They may be the first in their family to attend university. Families and friends also may not know how to support them along their learning journey. This uncertainty can act as a disincentive to students for lower socio-economic backgrounds they may feel that 'college is not a realistic option no matter how hard they may work' (O' Riordan and Lynch, 1998, p.472). It's of no surprise that a report by Boeren (2009, p.158) tells us that 'people with high needs of increasing their skills and knowledge are least likely to participate in adult education courses'.

Kearns sees that education is an 'inherently more 'risky' venture for mature students than it is for their younger counterparts (2014, p.92). Many take on this risk with support from their families and workplace, others have to do it alone. There is also a risk as it might not pay off for them in the long-term. Some reports such as Fields (2012) have shown that adults who return to education at an older age do not gain the financial benefits. One could argue that those from a lower socio-economic background have more to benefit in the long-term, but it's that

initial decision to participate and then to follow through with that's harder for them. They are willing to 'invest in participation under the condition that the costs must not exceed the benefits' (Boeren, 2009, p.158). A study of the Irish context found that mature students are often at a greater risk financially, socially, psychologically, and academically than their younger counter parts' (Kearns, 2014, p.95). Full time study can place immense financial burden on mature students, and this can lead to stress in other areas of their lives. Many students also don't realise the 'true costs of participation and the considerable impact this can have on their studies' (Kearns, 2014, p.95). This pressure can impact on how they 'experience' the BA. It can also cause friction in the home as many couples have to make sacrifices if one of them decides to return to education.

In a study by O' Riordan and Lynch (1998, p.472) it was found that 'limited economic resources dictated spending priorities in the households; day to day survival; putting food on the table, making ends meet, took precedence over optional goods, including higher education'. Mature students have more financial commitments than traditional students. Many are paying rent, mortgages, childcare costs, and day to day expenses that the younger cohort do not have to consider, before they pay university fees. There are supports in place but it's not straightforward. Mature students are less likely to be awarded the SUSI grant. They have 'almost three times the rate of refusal compared to under 23-year olds' (HEA, 2021, p.41). Student choosing to study part-time are unable to seek any SUSI funding. That initial decision to return to education for adults has to take in to the 'complex financial, personal and caring commitments around which they have to fit university' (Bowl, 2001, p.155).

'Is lifelong learning making a difference' (Field, 2012), looks at the economic impact of lifelong learning. One would imagine that gaining a qualification later in life would contribute to a rise in earning potential, but Fields (2012, p.3) article notes that studies such as 'the British General Household Survey, Jenkins et al (2002), Ekstrom (2003) say not. Albrecht et al (2007 cited in Fields, 2012, p.3) point out there is 'little or no impact of adult learning on incomes'. Many feel that gaining a degree will transform their lives. Research by Merrill et al. (2020, p.168) reported the 'belief that higher education changes lives and offers significant developmental opportunities was very common amongst working-class students'.

Looking at this from a gender perspective it was noted that women gain more than men as 'qualifications of all kinds are generally more influential on women's wages than men' (Field, 2012, p.3). Age also impacted less favourably on non-traditional students as it was found that

'the nearer they are to retirement, the lower the rate of return' (Field, 2012, p.6). The possible outcomes are unclear, and little has been done to negate the financial barriers that remain in place. Although much has been done to encourage adults into higher education it's still a risky venture for many. Research by Kearns (2014, p.95) states that 'students hold high expectations that their efforts will result in financially rewarding jobs or careers, despite evidence to the contrary'. Many will still continue to take this risk as for them it's a risk worth taking. One would hope that they are able to reap some rewards in the long term, be it financial reward or a sense of personal fulfilment.

Personal Development

Adults return to education return for many reasons, for some it can be to gain academic credentials for others it's more of a personal journey. Fleming et al. (1997, p.10) found that 'students go to university in pursuit of knowledge, for some this is for their own delight and for others it is to enhance their job prospects'. In Where Next? a study of work and life experiences of mature students in three higher education institutions the 'majority of participants expressed a long-standing inner desire to return to education, a sense of unfinished business' (Kenny et.al 2010, p.110). At the outset of the mature students educational journey, they may be unaware of the other potential benefits coming their way. Fleming et al. (1997, p.10) pointed to 'alternative indicators such as personal growth, a more critical perspective, a more socially engaged consciousness, or a worthwhile job' as 'indicators of success'.

Increased self-esteem is probably the most universal and widely documented outcome of learning (Schuller et al. 2004, p.41). In research by Hammond (cited in Schuller et al. 2004, p.42) it was noted that respondents of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, occupations, and educational backgrounds mentioned increased self-esteem and self-efficacy as outcomes of their learning. Notably this applied 'regardless of the respondent's initial level of confidence'. Field (2012, p.7) mentions the 'impact of learner confidence, self-esteem and the relationship between adult learning and well-being'.

The 3rd GRALE: Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (UNESCO, 2016) shows evidence of the direct link between education and people having a better understanding of their health and living a healthier lifestyle. The report also identified a UK study which found' that no matter what path adults have taken in their early years, participating in education between

the ages of 33 and 42 has positive effects on smoking cessation, exercise, and life satisfaction, all of which are indicators of long-term health' (Aontas, 2021, pg.1).

Another theme in the area of personal development that arises is how returning to education impacts on one's well-being. Firstly, one has to acknowledge that the term 'well-being' is very broad and seems to be the new 'buzz word' in education. There are many definitions of well-being such as 'developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community' (Shah and Marks 2004 cited in Field, 2009, p. 3). Another sees well-being as 'a dynamic state that refers to individuals' ability to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community' (Beddington et al. cited in Field, 2011, p.17). Research by Fields (2011, p. 17) states that there are 'good reasons for considering well-being to be among the most important outcomes of adult learning'. It was given little consideration in the past as most research focussed on measurable outcomes such as increased wages, a more skilled work force and employment rates. Due to increased awareness around mental health and the role it plays in workers' health and therefore production it has gained a new level of importance.

The future of well-being and its role in adult education has gained significant ground in the past few years with policy makers at EU level. It is seen as being one of the 'cornerstones in the work on adult education in the next decade' (EAEA, 2021). The new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030 recognised the role of well-being in adult learning. It notes how it 'supports personal, social, and professional development and fulfilment, health, and wellbeing, in accordance with the individual's current and future needs, talents and aspirations' (EAEA, 2021, p.8). Investment in adult education can and does lead to a reduction on public money spending in areas such as health as people who are educated make better lifestyle choices It is important for the link between adult education and well-being to be recognised and reflected in future policies such as the OECD's plan to 'evaluate outcomes such as health status, work-life balance, social connections, civic engagement and personal safety as identifiers of the most significant social benefits of education' (Aontas, 2021, p.1).

As well as mentioning the positive effects of education Field (2012, p.7) notes that 'learning can be associated with stress and anxiety and erode factors that have helped people maintain good mental health'. Mc Mahon (cited in Fleming et al. 1997, p.1) described his experience as a mature undergraduate student as 'struggling to make deadlines, grappling with unfamiliar study techniques and schedules, stressful and mystifying assessment procedures, an isolating

and competitive educational ethos, and a sense of cultural alienation'. Schuller et al. notes that 'learning can be ambiguous or double edged in its effects'' (2004, p.32). As mentioned earlier, many have to deal with financial pressures when returning to education this also impacts on their mental health. The juggle of family life and study is also something that features in the literature. In an article by Field and Morgan-Klein (2013) women spoke about how they were still expected to do the bulk of the childrearing and housework while studying. The initial presumption is that it would bring positive effects to the family unit. Instead, the 'family member's personal development may come at the expense of pain or loss on the part of other's (Schuller et al. 2004, p.8). This can in turn go on to negatively impact on the students mental well-being.

Becoming more sociologically aware of the world around us is one of the benefits of learning as an adult. It can give you a whole new perspective of the world. This can be beneficial, and you may become more civically aware, but it can also bring problems. Aldridge & Lavender cited in Field (2012, p.10) states that students 'experienced 'disbeliefs' such as stress, broken relationships, and a new dissatisfaction with one's present way of life'. Research by Field and Morgan-Klein (2013, p.170) mention how returning to education caused 'marital tension' and how some marriages had 'broken up'. Schuller et al. (2004, p. 8) notes that 'individuals can lose their identities or their friends as a result of changes brought about by participation in learning'. Becoming more aware of the inequality in the world and where you are positioned in society regarding that inequality can be an uncomfortable position for many. It can take time to adjust to this new understanding. For these students it's important for them to know that 'education is not a shield that protects people from experience but is a means of managing the experience in some more or less purposive fashion' (Schuller et al. 2004, p.30).

Social Capital

Another common theme that arises in the literature is 'Social Capital'. The OECD (2001, p. 41) define 'Social Capital' as 'networks together with shared norms values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups'. Different theorists have different views on the term. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p.119) see social capital as 'the sum of resources actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'. Bourdieu (1986) would also see a link between social capital and the other two capital's

economic and cultural. People have varying levels of social capital that they can tap into. The amount often depends on one's socio-economic background. The saying 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' correlates with this. Of course, one must not think that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have no social capital they do, but it's not often transferrable to the world of education.

Putnam (2000, cited in Schuller et al. 2004, p.17) sees social capital as 'the networks and the norms which enable people to contribute effectively to common goals', it also 'refers to the relationships that exist between individuals or groups of individuals'. Bourdieu's perspective of social capital (1986) is rooted more directly than Putnam's in issues of social class and the reproduction of power relations but deals less with the broader social domains such as civic participation (Schuller et al. 2004, p.17). John Field (2003, p.143) describes the concept of social capital as 'the resources that people derive from their relationships with others'.

The concept of social capital has become popular with policy makers over the past decade. The World bank has done research on 'the role social capital plays in reducing poverty in developing countries' (Kilpatrick et al, 2003, p. 418). The European Commission have examined the ways in how social capital can play a part in regional development (Mouque, 1999, cited in Kilpatrick at al 2003, p. 418). The research centre on the wider benefits of learning has demonstrated that 'participation in learning tends to enhance social capital, by helping develop social competences, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others' (Schuller et al 2004). We use it in our everyday lives. We can tap into these connections to get things done. These 'social relationships serve as a resource allowing individuals and groups to cooperate in order to achieve goals that otherwise might have been attained only with difficulty, if at all' (Kilpatrick et al, 2003, p.417).

Many people return to education as a social outlet. It's a way to meet new people and gain a qualification along the way. In Sweden a report by Svensson (cited in Schuller & Desjardins, 2010, p.6) stated that at least thirty three percent of adults indicate that their motive for participating in study circles was to meet others'. A report Bailey et al (2010, cited in Field, 2011, p.19) showed that there was a 'self-reported tendency among learners to be willing to talk to new people. According to Schuller et al. (2004, cited in Field, 2011, p.19) shows that education 'enhances social capital, by helping develop social competences, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others. Schuller et al. (2004) and Kilpatrick et al. (2003) point to the bonds that adult learners made with other students and how

they helped each other along their learning journey. It's not only other students that they can bond with, research by Tett and Maclachlan (2007) cited in Field (2011, p.19) shows that students also widened 'their bridging networks, through contacts with their tutors, and other faculty staff. There is of course also a link between gaining social capital and the health and well-being of the individual as 'learning also appears to strengthen people's support networks' (Field, 2011, p.19). The more supported people feel the more they are able to other, thus it has a domino effect. In Fleming & Murphy's College Knowledge (1997, p.53) they discuss the support that mature students gave each other, it was said to help 'both personally and academically'.

Gaining friendships and widening social circles is one benefit that students of all ages can relate to. This can of course bring challenges to mature students because as well as extending their social circle, returning to education can 'impact on their original social circle and it can 'disrupt bonding ties', such as close kinship and neighbourhood connections' (Field, 2012, p.10). According to Schuller at al. (2004, p.122) adult education can 'lead to a dissolution and reconstruction of social networks and friendships'. With social capital along comes change, some may welcome enlarging their social network and for some is can be a time of uncertainty. For other's it can mean that 'individuals can lose their identities or their friends as a result of changes brought about by their participation in learning' (Schuller et al. 2004, p.8). According to Fleming et al (1997, p.20) 'college life can damage relationships and in turn these relationships can have a profound impact on the experience of being at college'. Trying to straddle two different social networks can be difficult to navigate. Fields (2009, p.20) says that this is 'inseparable from the processes of social mobility and change that learning produces'.

Many adults want to make a change in their lives they have made the decision to return to education but then they struggle. Field thinks that this is down to the 'bonding ties' that their original community provides. This community can 'form a barrier to social and geographical mobility, but it does nevertheless provide access to types of social support – often unconditional and taken for granted – that can be extremely important in times of trouble' (Fields 2009, p.20). It can be unsettling for the adult learner to feel that they are leaving this support network behind unsure of what type of support the newly acquired support network can offer. University can bring 'new social ties and implied social mobility', and this can 'challenge the attractiveness of the old ties' (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2013, p, 171). It can be a challenge to embrace the new world that education opens while still staying true to your family background. The benefits

of returning to education have to be worth the challenges you face along the way. As one learner in the research by Field and Morgan-Klein (2013, p.170) remarked 'I think if you've destroyed your previous life in order to do the degree that's not a good ending you know'.

Transformative Learning

Another common area in adult education literature around the mature student experience is 'transformative learning'. Mezirow sees transformative learning as a crucial part in the adult learners journey. It equips the learner with the tools to navigate their world. It can 'help the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purpose rather than uncritically acting on those of others (Mezirow, 1997, p.11).

Illeris (2014, p.40) states that 'the concept of transformative learning compromises all learning that implies change in the identity of the learner'. This is a challenging process as it often means that we have to question our 'meaning schemes' which are long held beliefs and attitudes, and 'meanings perspectives' which can mean examining our sense of self. Laros and Taylor (2017, p.18) describe perspectives as 'a double-edged sword whereby they give meaning (validation) to our experiences, but at the same time skew our reality'. These 'meanings' are developed from childhood through socialisation, cultural practices, and life experiences. 'Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world' (Mezirow, 1991, p.167).

We are often unaware as to how our long-held perspectives influence how we view the world. It is possible to change them, and this can be done through critical reflection and discourse which Mezirow (cited in Fleming, 2018, p.4) states are the 'twin requirements for transformative learning'. This type of discussion involves the 'assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values' (Mezirow, 2003, p.59). This is an essential part of the journey to transformation. It's not a straightforward process, and many find it a painful and frightening experience as it's not easy to let go of the views that have shaped your life. It can lead the learner to question their whole belief system, and their life around them. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built (Mezirow, 1990, p.1). Within critical reflection are different levels and research by Liimatainen et al. Kreber (cited in Taylor, 2007, p.186) points out that there is an 'assumption that all forms of reflection are equally significant'. Reflection has to be at a deeper level before it becomes critical. It is more complex. It is 'not

concerned with the how or the how to of action but with the why, the reasons for and consequences of what we do' (Mezirow, 1990, p.13).

Another important part to transformative learning is 'experience'. Taylor and Cranton (2013, p.35) say that experience is 'the primary medium of a transformation, and it is the revision of the meaning of experience that is the essence of learning'. Experience is what we have lived through in our lives. We all have lived through different experiences and dealt with our lives in different ways. Another thing we have to be aware of though is the context of that experience. The personal and historical context is significant to the evolution and outcome of a transformative experience (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p.36). Experience is socially constructed, and no two experiences are the same.

The above three parts, critical reflection, dialogue, and experience have been noted as central to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Another idea is empathy. As noted earlier, critical reflection can be an emotional experience. Scholars such as Stevens - Long, and Shapiro & McClintock, (cited in Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p.37) have helped with the 'recognition of the significance of emotions to transformative learning'. They see 'empathy' as playing a key role in a transformative learning experience. Empathy can help the learner to be more open to listening to other points of view in a non-judgemental way. Gravatt and McLeod et.al, (cited in Taylor and Cranton, 2013, p. 38) see that 'a major outcome of a perspective transformation involves an increase in empathy towards others'.

When transformative learning occurs, we re- interpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to an old experience (Mezirow, 1991, pg.11). Our frames of reference are changed. It gives us a new 'lens' in which to view the world. As Mezirow (cited in Fleming, 2018, p.5) puts it, it's the 'lifeworld that is transformed', this is a 'vast inventory of unquestioned assumptions and shared cultural convictions, including codes, norms, roles, social practices, psychological patterns of dealing with others and individual skills'. Letting go of these lifelong held views is not an easy process and involves critical reflection from the learner. Only then can you deal with the past before you move onto the future. This type of learning is 'understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action' (Mezirow, 1996, p.162). It may help us become aware of the structural inequalities in society.

Many people struggle to make sense of the new world that has opened up to them after their transformative learning experience. Mezirow states that this 'disillusionment may, however, result eventually in another perspective transformation, and so on in a process that potentially continues throughout and adults life. (Mezirow, 1991, p.159). Transformative learning has powerful connotations and one can get caught up in the 'romantic notion' of freedom from constraints, a notion which is a premise of transformative learning' theory' (Baptiste, cited in Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p.38). Those working in the field of adult education that subscribe to the teachings of Mezirow must realise that not everyone has the desired outcome. Illeris (2014, p.91) argues that many adults have 'more than enough to do to just get by practically and financially and have neither the opportunity nor the reserves to look towards the self-actualisation or learning in which those in more favourable positions increasingly become involved'.

Transformative learning is a complex process, and the conditions have to be right in order for it to happen. For adults the prospect of having a transformative learning experience is more likely as they are at a stage in their lives where they may have to face challenges such as marital breakdown, bereavement, retirement, or their children leaving home. Illeris (2014, p.89) sees adulthood as 'the golden age in relation to both identity and transformative learning'. These new life situations can force them to re-assess their lives and perhaps be willing to making some life changes. These changes do not happen overnight. It takes time to reflect and realise the need for change and to put this need into action. This is known as reflective action, 'where making decisions or taking action, predicated upon the insights resulting from reflection' (Mezirow, 1991, p.108).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the context of what is happening with mature students in Ireland from a policy and government perspective. I then reviewed literature in relation to the mature student experience in higher education. This review was done under four key themes that emerged from the literature, financial pressures, personal development, social capital, and transformative learning.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

Bryman (2012, p.5) describes social research as a way of investigating the social world in a way that "draws on the social sciences for conceptual and theoretical inspiration". Before any research takes place, the researcher must consider how they are going to approach it. This is done by outlining their social research methodology that Grix, (2002, p.179) describes as complex frameworks used to investigate and analyse 'the logic, potentialities, and limitations of particular research methods'. In this chapter I will firstly outline why I chose this research area. I will then outline my ontological and epistemological approach, affecting how a researcher decides to study the social world. I will review how I collected my data and outline my reasons for choosing this method. I will explain how I chose the research participants and finally outline and ethical considerations and limitations.

Rationale

At the start of my methodology chapter, it is important to recognise that all research is done through our own 'personal lens'. Why one chooses a topic to research and how the research is carried out is filtered through our own lived experiences and how we view the world. I returned to education as a mature student to complete a BA at Maynooth University. It has had a huge impact on my own life. As well as gaining an academic qualification, I gained a better understanding of the world, a clearer sense of self, I developed new friendships and much more. As Mezirow (1991) would say I had a 'transformative learning experience'.

While reflecting on my own journey over the past few years, I have realised that my 'drive' to do this research project is down to the fact that I want to better understand my own experience of higher education and how it impacted on my life. I have also worked in the field of education for twenty years. Over this time, I have witnessed how young people experience education from primary right through to the end of secondary school. Because of my own experiences as a teacher and a student I have remained curious as to how students experience education.

Research Philosophy

Ontological and epistemological position

Grix (2002, p.177) argues that ontology is the starting point of all research, after which one's epistemological and methodological positions logically follow. One's ontological approach affects the whole research process. It is an important influence on *how* research is conducted. Maxwell (2015, p.46) also recognises this noting that 'any view is a view from some perspective and is therefore shaped by the location (social and theoretical) and the lens of the observer.

There are two dominant ontological approaches in social scientific research: objectivism and constructivism. Objectivism "asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors" (Bryman, 2016, p.29), i.e., we have no influence over the world around us. My own approach is constructivism, it recognises that 'our individual circumstances affect our perception and construction of 'reality' and that meanings may be varied and complex' (Hardiman, 2012, p.60).

Epistemology is "concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how researchers can ensure they are both adequate and legitimate" according to Maynard & Purvis (1994, p.10). It's about the 'type' of knowledge that we deem to be suitable for our research, the modes of assessing validity and quality of knowledge. We all have beliefs about what 'type' of knowledge is right and what 'type' is wrong. How we decide this is down to culture, past experiences, philosophical beliefs. 'The central concern of epistemology is what counts as legitimate 'knowledge': in a world where all sorts of knowledge exist, how do we know which to trust, which are meaningful' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.28). All research is constructed in a certain way. It will be carried out with different assumptions underpinning it. I recognise that I bring my own views and experiences to the research.

There are several contrasting epistemological views on how the social world should be studied. At either end of the scale are positivists and interpretivists. A positivist looks at research from a scientific point of view using precise quantitative measurements and techniques. A quantitative research method is, according to Schutt (2012, p.55) 'a collection of techniques that rely on numbers to represent empirical reality and that presume a positivist philosophy in which it is presumed that the social world is knowable by observers who quantify its

characteristics'. I believe the interpretivist approach is the best one to use for my research. Interpretivists believe scientific approaches cannot measure how people act and feel. Interpretivists focuses on human intentions, meanings, understandings, and subjectivities. This type of researcher gains this kind of knowledge through qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and observation. Interpretivism 'emphasises the importance of understanding subjective meanings people give to reality without believing that reality itself is socially constructed' (Schutt, 2015, p.20).

This is the 'type' of information that I am seeking for my research, the unmeasurable impacts, the emotions involved, the experiences, the learning. I want to know how people were really 'impacted' by returning to education. I don't need to hear about the academic qualifications gained, or employment prospects, what I am looking for is deeper than that. My aim is to seek out how returning to education impacted on the lives of the participants. How did this experience affect them personally, did it impact their families, what will they carry with them from the BA?

Methodological Framework

The first thing we should look at is, what is methodology and what is the difference between that and methods. Methodology 'refers to the framework within which our research is conducted' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.31). It's the philosophical reasons as to why we chose to conduct the research in the manner in which we did. Within this framework are decisions relating to what theories we will use to carry out our research. Methods 'refer to the tool or technique for collecting or analysing data' such as using interviews to collect data and using 'thematic analysis' to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.31).

Methods used

I used a qualitative approach for this research. I believed this type of an approach allows for a better understanding of the meaning that people take from an experience. Following adult education researchers in the field such as Finnegan & Merrill (2017), who drew from biographical interviews from mature students in elite and non-elite institutions, and Kearns (2014) who looked at the first-year experiences of matures students in two Irish Universities. I

also wanted the student voice to be central to my research, the words spoken by the participants in the interviews became my data.

Braun & Clarke (2013, p.9) talk about approaching research with 'a qualitative sensibility', I seen this linking in with my approach as over the years I have developed a 'critical and questioning approach to life and knowledge'. I have become more reflexive in my practice as an educator and more willing to delve deeper to gain a better understanding of 'data' during my research. Braun and Clarke (2013, p.6) refer to the development of a double consciousness or an analytic 'eye' or 'ear' where you can listen intently, and critically reflect on what is said, simultaneously. I felt that this thorough approach would help me find the type of data that I want. What I was seeking wasn't 'measurable', I wanted to hear the stories, the experiences, the effects, how people were impacted by the BA.

In order to get the type of information to help me answer my research question I wanted to hear directly from the participants, as Creswell (2018, p.45) notes 'allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we read in the literature'. I wanted the 'student voice' to be central to my research and in order to best capture this I felt semi-structured interviews offered the best way to relay this story. This approach also gave me the freedom in the interview to ask different questions if the participant brought me in an unanticipated direction. I expected to get a variety of answers I assumed from the literature and my own personal experience that impacts would be complex and layered. I will discuss the interview process and skills required in greater detail below under the interview heading.

In choosing this approach I was also aware of the complexity that it brings and the range of skills that I needed. Interviewing a diverse group of people such as I did, also meant hearing different perspectives of the experience of successfully completing a degree. Qualitative researchers must 'observe keenly, take notes systematically and question respondents strategically' (Chambliss, 2016, p.200). Data analysis in qualitative research can be time consuming, as the data collected has to be sorted through, transcribed, and narrowed down into themes, this is called thematic analysis. During this process I noted the most common themes emerging from the data. Each theme was then researched further to see how they 'impacted' on the students.

For this research I collected data through interviewing past graduates of the BA. I followed an inductive approach. An inductive approach begins with data collection using qualitative methods. The 'data are allowed to "speak for themselves" by the *emergence* of conceptual

categories and descriptive themes' (Sutter, 2012, p.346). The data was then analysed to determine the emerging patterns. An Inductive thematic analysis 'aims to generate an analysis from the bottom (the data) up; analysis is not shaped by existing theory (but analysis is always shaped to some extent by the researcher's standpoint, disciplinary knowledge, and epistemology' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 175). Creswell & Plano Clark (2007, p. 23) describe the inductive researcher as someone who works from the 'bottom-up, using participants' view to build broader themes and generate a theory of interconnecting themes'. This research is approach is also informed by the literature from leading theorists in the field such as Schuller, Field, Merrill, and Finnegan.

Sample

In order to answer my research question, it was important to get the information I needed from the right group of people or population. The group that I drew the information from is known as the sample. (Chambliss & Schutt, 2016, p.92) note that a sample is "a subset of the population used to study the population as a whole". Purposive sampling is the sample method used for this research study as I wanted to focus on a specific group. Braun & Clarke (2013, p.335) describe purposive sampling as 'selecting participants or data on the basis that they will have certain characteristics or experience'.

Before I started the process, I had to think about who I would include and who I would and would not include. In order to be deemed suitable for the research, the participants had to be past graduates of the BA, up to and including 2020 graduates. I felt this was important as I wanted the participants to have had time to reflect on how returning to education impacted on them. Access to the respondents was easily gained as I was a past graduate of the BA. I felt that as a past graduate students would be more inclined to agree to be interviewed. I knew some of them personally who I contacted by phone and email; the rest responded to a call out that I posted on the BA Facebook page for which I am an administrator. The Facebook post gave a brief outline of my research question and why I am interested in doing the research. I left my email address for those who would like to contact me about participating or for those requiring further information. I got ten respondents to my call out. Six were from my Facebook call out the rest were students I contacted directly via email or phone. Out of those ten, seven did the interviews. For the three that didn't participate, one never responded to my follow up email, another had personal issues at the time that prevented her from taking part and the final person

had yet to graduate so was unsuitable. Out of the seven participants six were female and one was male. Initially I thought it would have been better to have a better gender mix, but from my own experience on the BA the Community Studies BA classes were predominantly female and to be true to the research I had to go with the mix I got.

The Interviews

When developing the questions, I had to think about what exactly I wanted to find out. This is not as straightforward as I thought. I had to be more precise as to what I needed to know. I had to make sure what I asked helped me answer my research question. I eventually came up with seven questions. I piloted these questions with a colleague and made a few changes. Due to the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, I knew that other question's might arise during the interview brought on my something that the participant might say. I had to allow time in the interview for this.

I wanted to start off with a general, "tell me a little bit about yourself" question. This was followed by another less sensitive question. I wanted to settle the participant. I was conscious going into the interview that some of the questions may trigger negative memories, so I was careful as to how I sequenced the questions. I then proceeded onto the more precise questions such as, what brought you to the BA, how would you describe your experience on the BA, what motivated you during the BA and what impact did the BA have on your life, to name a few. I followed up some of these with more probing questions, such as 'you mentioned ……earlier can you tell me a little bit more about this. I finished up the interview with a closing question. Braun & Clarke (2013, p.81) call this a 'clean up question' as it 'allows the participants to raise issues that are important to them that hasn't already been covered'. Please find the list of questions in the appendix section B.

Prior to the interviews each participant was sent an outline as to why I was doing the research, how I was going to do it (semi-structured questions) and a consent form to sign before we did the interview. The first four interviews took place at Maynooth University. I was conscious that they were travelling to meet me, so I let them choose a time that suited them. Prior to each interview I booked a free classroom or meeting room. I wanted to have a room where we wouldn't be interrupted. It was also an area in the university that the participants were familiar with. I met each participant at the front of the building and chatted briefly before we started the

interview. I collected the signed consent form from them and asked them if they were still happy to proceed.

Three interviews took place online over Zoom. For those that did the interviews online, it was their choice as it suited them better than having to travel to Maynooth and juggle family and work commitments. Again, I let the interviewees choose the time for the Zoom interview. I had met the three participants before, so this helped with the online rapport. Similar to the face-to face interviews we had a brief chat beforehand, and I thanked them for emailing back the consent form. I then checked if they were happy to proceed with the interview. Initially I was hesitant about doing a Zoom interview but soon realised the conversation flowed equally as well online as it did face to face.

I used the Otter app on my phone to record all of the interviews. Each interview took around forty minutes. During the interview I was careful not to rush the participants and gave them plenty of time to answer. At times I drew on my active listening skills and had to sit in silence with them as I knew they were pondering over something, and they needed time to express themselves. Some participants led me to ask further questions on areas I never thought about. Their experience was different to mine, they faced other challenges that I didn't think of. Witnessing this I knew I would have to make a few changes, so after each interview I examined my questions again to 'fine tune' them. I was glad to have this freedom as it led me to collecting rich data. At the end of the interviews, I thanked each participant and told them I would transcribe the interview and send it to them for their approval over the coming weeks. I did a voice note after each interview that I could listen back to at the time of analysis to help me best capture the interview.

Ethics

The ethics guidelines set out by Maynooth University were followed at all times during the research process. Ethical guidelines protect the field for further research and protect the research population. The principal ethical consideration in social research is to "avoid causing harm, maintaining confidentiality, and allowing the participants to give informed consent" according to DeWalt and DeWalt (2011). During the recruitment process I outlined that I was a past graduate. Because of this, I felt I had 'insider' knowledge of the experience that I was investigating. I hoped that this would minimises the power struggle that can sometimes occur

between the researcher and the participant in an interview setting. I felt this also encouraged participants to come forward for interviews as they viewed me as 'one of them'. Each participant was sent information as to why I was doing my research and a consent document to read through and sign before the interview.

At the start of the interview, I thanked each participant for taking part and again relayed that they were free to pause at any time or to change their mind if unhappy about any aspect of the interview. During the interview and analysis, I had to be aware of my own bias and 'keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold' (Creswell, 2018, p.44). I could not assume that everyone had the same experience as I had. I was open to hearing things that I didn't agree with. For some, the impact of returning to education could be emotional and stir up negative memories. I was sensitive to any issues that arose and had information about supports available. In order to remain reflexive as an insider researcher I had to be guided by the 'qualitative sensibility' I mentioned earlier. I did this by being critically reflective 'on the research process and on one's own role as researcher' (Finlay, 2002 cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.10).

All data that was collected was anonymised during the transcribing process and stored on a password protected laptop that was kept at my own home Each participants interview was transcribed and sent to them for approval. It was important that they knew they could make amendments if they felt that I didn't correctly capture what they said. They were also notified that they could withdraw their interview before the final draft was completed. One of the participants sent back their transcription and wanted to further clarify what they meant during the interview. This was helpful as it made that section of the interview clearer to me, so I was able to use it.

Limitations

Every research project will have its limitations. From the outset I had hoped to interview a more diverse range of people. At one stage I thought I should specifically approach more male graduates, or people from different ethnic backgrounds. But upon reflection I realised that that is the reality of the group. From my own time on the BA, I remembered that the class group was made up mostly of females from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Data Analysis

After each interview I made voice note in order to capture my immediate thoughts of how it went. It meant that I had a record that I could go back to when I was analysing the interview transcripts. I wanted to ensure I had captured what the participant really said. The Otter app was helpful in the recording process, and does give a text version of the interview, but unfortunately is not able to fully decipher exactly what is said word for word. Because of this I listened back repeatedly to each interview until I got each transcript perfect. This was quite time consuming, taking up to six hours for each interview, but I felt it was necessary in order to capture what each participant said and meant correctly.

I then printed out each interview and went through it making notes and highlighting recurring themes. I summarised each transcript and picked out quotes that I felt could be useful for the themes I had in my head. Once I settled on these themes, motivation to return to learning, effect on personal well-being, significant learning about self and society and social connections. The transcripts were analysed again with these in mind. I highlighted in different colours the quotes that I felt were linked. Trying to find commonality was at times problematic, but I still believe this was the best approach to use for my research. Qualitative research can 'embrace this messiness……in a way quantitative methods cannot' (Shaw et al. cited in Braun & Clarke 2013, p.24).

Conclusion

This chapter had outlined my research approach and my ontological and epistemological views as a researcher. I have described what I mean by methods and methodological approach. I described the approach I used and why I chose it. I explained how I chose my research participants. I outlined how I collected my data. I gave a detailed account of the interview process. I then moved onto explaining my ethical considerations and limitations. To conclude I explained how I analysed the data.

Chapter 4 Findings

Introduction

For this chapter I will outline the findings from my interviews. The themes that arose from the interviews are economic realities, motivation to learn, effect on personal well-being, social connections, and significant learning about the self and society. For my research I interviewed seven graduates from the community studies BA at Maynooth university. All seven were past graduates of the course aged from late twenties to mid-fifties. Before I go into my findings, I will briefly introduce three of the seven participants in the research to give you an idea of the range of students on the BA.

Joe early fifties joined the BA when he retired from work. He wanted to do something totally different. Getting a third level qualification was always at the back of his mind he had a chance when he was younger but didn't take it, he wanted to go off and travel the world. He was spurred on by his wife and children's academic achievements. He wanted to be the same as them. His motivation for doing the BA was personal he didn't need it for any 'monetary' reasons as he had retired and had a pension. He wanted to become more active in his local area. He felt that BA gave him some standing in the organisations that he was volunteering at such as the local resource centre and the tidy towns committee.

Mag's early thirties joined the BA when she was twenty-three years of age. She didn't go straight to college from school as she was not eligible for the SUSI grant. She was from a socially disadvantaged area and people from there 'didn't pay to go to college' where she was from, it wasn't the 'done thing'. She did a social care course got a job and saved up to do the BA. Although she found the juggle of work, personal life, and college hard she really enjoyed the BA which she called 'transformative'. She progressed onto the master's in adult and community education.

Patricia early fifties joined the BA in 2016. Post-secondary school she did a science course but left as she didn't enjoy the course. She worked in labs for a while but didn't enjoy it. She then got married and then spent the next twenty years raising her four sons. She describes her desire to return to education as 'a scratch she needed to itch'. She enjoyed the course as it was something for her outside of the family unit. Her confidence grew and she made new friends.

She got a job as an SNA which she would have never applied for prior to the BA. She plans to do further studies in the future.

Economic realities

As mentioned previously the cost of returning to education is one of the major barriers affecting adult learners. Because of the nature of the BA being part-time, students were not eligible to apply for a SUSI grant. The BA group is mixed in terms of age and socio-economic background. Due to this mix I expected people to have different experiences of the costs associated with the BA. Niamh's worked in the civil service, and they paid her course fees. Mary, Joe, Ann, and Faye never mentioned anything about the financial challenges associated with the BA. Maybe they did not want to disclose such information, but it was interesting to note in comparison to the other interviews.

Joe recognised the fact that he was in a good financial position.

> *'It didn't matter to me in terms of material things, I had a pension. I don't have the worries of starting to raise a family or anything life that'*

Mag's, and Sinead both mentioned the financial pressures that the BA brought. Mag's was from a socially disadvantaged area in Dublin. Her family were just above the income threshold for the SUSI grant. Her family didn't stop her from going it just wasn't what was done in her area.

> *'And it wasn't that my parents said we're not giving you the money to go to college. it's just not what we did, we didn't pay for college where I was from. Do you know, it wasn't the done thing then'*

For Mag's her educational prospects were in the hands of the people who made the grant decisions at SUSI. It was very simple.

> *'If you get the grant you go to college if you don't get the grant you don't go to college'*

Although she really wanted to go, she couldn't afford it.

> *'I was eighteen, I wasn't working, my parents didn't have the funds for me to go to college'*

Mag's ended up doing a social course and then got a job. She continued to live with her parents and started to save up money to go back to college. When asked about the negatives of the BA she describes the cost as a,

> *'Huge financial burden'*

She also didn't realise that the course would have some unexpected costs

> *'The cost of the toll bridges coming over, you had the summer modules where I had to take them as unpaid leave'*

She acknowledges that she was able to do it back then when she didn't have as many commitments, was working full-time and living with her parents.

> *'I wouldn't afford it now, like now I am buying a house…it was the only time that I could say 'I can put €13000 into study you know'*

For Sinead who was recently separated and a single parent, she started the BA to enable her to get into teaching. She wanted the summers off to spend more time with her son. She knew she would be offered redundancy from her workplace and stuck with her job until it came.

> *'It's expensive, like I was a single parent. I was working and using my redundancy money to pay for it'*

It was important for her as a single parent to be able to provide for her son she was able to juggle financially

> *'My identity as a mother and being self-sufficient and independent and being able to provide for and raise me child in a nice area, in my own home'.*

Motivation to learn

Five of the seven participants mentioned that returning to education was something that was on their mind for some time prior to their return. Due to life circumstances at the time of finishing school, they didn't proceed to higher education or started and didn't finish as in Mary's case. Returning to education was not something that some of the students decided overnight. They held onto the idea of returning to education for a long time before they put it into practice. Many of them were out of the education system for over twenty years. Others

were inspired by seeing their own family members at university. This desire to reach previously unmet educational goals is what drove them back to complete a BA.

The other two had previously completed a course at third level. While they had a desire to return to learning it was more for employment purposes with Ann needing a level eight degree for work and Sinead doing the BA as a steppingstone to a new career. This difference in aspiration was easy to understand because they already had that experience of higher education.

Joe was offered the opportunity when he was younger but didn't take it and regretted it.

> *'I had the opportunity to go to college and I didn't take it and don't ask me why, I was young, I was 18 years of age and all I wanted to do was to get out and save the world so that's why'*

His wife and children had all pursued their education and he wanted to follow them.

> *'Yeah, it was something I wanted to do. I was reminded often more than twice that there are degrees and masters on the wall at home and they belong to my family and my wife. My wife and my three children's. So, I had to do something about it so, you have to catch up on them you know?*

Mary had done two years of a science course, she didn't enjoy it and left to work in a lab for a few years but never felt fulfilled. She always wanted to return. She put it on hold until her sons were older and didn't need her as much.

> *'I felt it was something that I hadn't finished, it was an itch I needed to scratch'.*

> *'I always felt it was something that I hadn't fulfilled'*

For Mary who was at home for the previous twenty years raising her family it was something just for her.

> *'I had an outlet outside of my family life. You know something that was just for me and not for anyone else'.*

As a mother of four boys, she actively encouraged them to do well in school and pursue a third level education. She felt that

> *'Education was the key if you want to do something it gave you choices and options'*

Kathy was offered her first choice on her CAO but following the sudden death of her father she decided to not take it. All of a sudden, she felt she had a responsibility to get out and start

earning money. She did a secretarial course and because of the lack of employment opportunities in Ireland at the time she had to emigrate to the UK. Throughout Kathy's working life in the UK, she sought out continuous professional development, she felt this was important.

> *'I wanted to find out more about the area I was working in'*

She always wanted to return to education. Her own mother returned in her fifties and did a BA and a postgraduate in history. This inspired her and she thought that maybe she would do the same.

> *'I did want to get that degree; I had put it off for a long time'*

Mag's was offered a place at third level after her Leaving Certificate, but she didn't qualify for the SUSI grant so was unable to attend. She instead enrolled on a social care course and got a job. She kept the idea of going to college at the back of her head.

> *'My Dad has returned as a mature student to college, and I was like, 'I really want to do that', so I have to think of another way around it'*

> *'At some stage I would go back, and I would do my degree, do you know?'*

Niamh who struggled with her earlier education due to learning difficulties finally got a dyslexia diagnosis aged forty-two. Getting that diagnosis meant that she was eligible for support which she was never offered in the past. She did a course previously but 'basically scrapped past'. It was thirty years since she was in education but knew this time it would be different with supports in place.

> *'It was something I always wanted and needed to do'*

Ann worked in the community education sector. She returned to get a qualification as she recognised that the field of adult and community education was becoming professionalised, and she would need a level eight to progress at work.

> *'It wasn't really a burning desire of mine to return to education, but I knew that it was going to be a requirement'*

> *'I wasn't doing it for anybody else. I was doing it solely for me. So, when I decided to do so, I'm pretty determined'*

Before she started the BA, she wrote down an affirmation stating that she would get first-class honours. That was her goal from day one.

> *'I was never aiming for anything less than that'*

Sinead had worked in a variety of fields from lab work to marketing to tourism. As a single mother she wanted to have a career that would give her more time at home with her son.

> *'I decided I was going to get this degree, do the Hdip, teach and I would have all my summers off to look after my kid'*

Effect on personal well-being

From the outset I knew that this group of non-traditional students returned to education for a variety of reasons. For many it was a personal journey and impacted on their well-being.

For Mary although she wanted to gain a third level qualification to seek employment, she recognises that the BA gave her more than what she thought.

> *'There were so many things that were good about the degree and all really from a personal point of view rather than an academic'.*

Doing the BA gave her the confidence to apply for a position as a SNA in a local school.

> *'I'm back in the workforce and I love it', I can't imagine not having that'.*

Joe had retired and had a good pension so was not doing the BA to seek employment. He wanted to do something for himself that was different to the army.

> *'I absolutely felt one of the main reasons I joined was actually that this was totally personal'*

> *'Yeah, that whole thing within yourself, you wanted to do something'*

It gave him a confidence boost as he felt that he might not have been able for it.

> *'It was a really good four years in so many ways for me personally as a person and academically having achieved what I achieved because I was very unsure of what I was going to be capable of having been out of the system for so long'*

Throughout the interview he states several times that he wasn't after any materialistic gain from the BA it was just for himself.

> *'I wasn't after the materialistic thing like no one is, everyone wants to do better. I really liked it, I really like it, it was a real big...sense of achievement'*

He was in a good position as he was under no pressure to find employment after the course.

> *'I feel sometimes my big thing was that it didn't matter to me whether I completed this course or not in terms of materialistic things, like I wasn't looking for a job'*

He felt that it was good grounding for him in his retirement.

> *'It's really good that I did it for me as a personal development and after all the learning all the stuff that I thought I knew around the world its good grounding'*

Mags initially struggled with the course and considered dropping out. She felt she was out of her depth and didn't understand the terminology used in class. Having been 'bit by the education bug' Mag's now sees education in a whole next context.

> *'It's not even about what job I'll get, it's all about what else I learn, and I didn't feel like that before, you know what else will I get exposed to, what new knowledge I will gain out of this'*

Her confidence has grown, and she feels that she can speak up if unsure of something.

> *'To have the sense to say, what does that mean, I'm not going to feel stupid, that to me is life changing'.*

For Niamh, she recognises she was lucky that her workplace funded the course, she would have liked to be moved to a different department that was in some way linked to her degree. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. They put up a notice in work about her completing the degree, but nothing changed.

> *'It was all for personal gain, it didn't help career wise'*

She found the juggle of work, home life and study hard. Her social life became 'non-existent' her life revolved around work and college. It really affected her.

> *'I would say it wasn't good for my well-being because I was always running to catch up with the next thing, my mind was always you know'*

It impacted on her homelife as there were rows over housework, eventually her family realised how important the BA was to her and helped more at home. Her sons were in college at the time, and this helped them understand the pressure she was under.

> *'They were a lot more accepting of like you know, 'this is important to your Mam, give her a helping hand'*

Although she struggled, Niamh is still eager to continue with her studies. She is coming towards retirement and feels she will have more time to go further with her studies. For her the BA wasn't a finishing point to her studies it's a beginning. Niamh is currently undertaking a masters'.

> *'I think I will definitely be looking to keep going because it's like the degree opened the door, I know I am only halfway through and I'm thinking it's an interesting world on the other side'*

Ann initially struggled with the course although she worked in the community education sector, she felt that she wasn't used to the facilitative approach that was used on the BA.

> *'I also had a huge dollop of imposter syndrome, like I was totally out of my comfort zone, I felt everybody on the course was academic and that they knew way more than me'*

Ann was initially sceptic about the facilitative approach but now uses it in her workplace. She feels that the BA gave her a new outlook.

> *'Looking at the world in a different lens it gave me such huge confidence'*

She had a busy life between her workplace where she was a manager, to her busy home life with six children. She like some of the other's seen that BA as something that totally personal.

> *'When you are off in Maynooth doing your studies, it's like a little piece of the world that belongs to you that doesn't belong to the rest of the people in your life'*

Despite the positive personal growth Ann felt that the BA had a 'negative' impact on her marriage.

> *'At the time my husband would have resented the time and energy I was putting into the BA'*

She did want to continue onto the master's but felt she would not be supported with the decision.

> *'When I finished and I graduated he said to me 'well that's done now you've done enough learning now, don't be thinking like about going on and doing anymore'*

> *'I would have loved to have gone straight from the degree to the master's, but I got the message loud and clear'*

Instead, she plans to return in a few years when her children are older. Although disappointed about not continuing she feels that it's the right decision for now to leave it for now.

Sinead had done several courses over the years and worked in different industries. She was now at a stage in her life where she wanted change.

> *'The BA was a changing point in my life because whatever education I did before that, it had nothing to do with me, it was learning skills for jobs………this was a more personal form of learning.*

She felt that she was gained a lot personally.

> *'It's a different knowledge that you get from the BA. It's not the accreditation. It's the self-knowledge, it's the personal development'*

It also gave her more confidence and gave her a new outlook on life.

> *'Oh Jesus, it gave me so much more confidence. It empowered me. It gave me insight and awareness, the ability to reflect and see really what's right and wrong, what's good and bad'*

She thinks that the type of learning she did on the course had a positive effect on her mental well-being.

> *'You have more ability for you self-efficacy, you are able to manage yourself better and that feeds into your psychosocial health, which shows an increase in resilience, which is an increase in well-being and better mental health'*

Although Sinead thoroughly enjoyed the course and knew she needed it in order to make a change in her life she felt guilty about leaving her child behind.

'I grieve for that time when I had to leave a child to go to work or to study or work or whatever, because I know I missed so much. If I could get back that time I would, but there is a loss, there is always a loss'

Kathy found that she gained confidence especially doing the drama modules

'I'm like there's no way I can stand up in front of a class but actually it teaches you so much about standing up and being able to speak and hear your own voice in this space. It's hugely important'

She really enjoyed the adult ed approach to teaching in learning and mainly focused on those modules during the BA.

'It's an amazing way to learn and it's just a different methodology of learning, But yeah absolutely amazing. I found that really, really helpful but also very enlightening as well'.

Kathy found that when the assignments were due everything at home went 'on hold' until they were done. Her family were very supportive of her doing the BA, but she often felt guilty about being away all day at work and then going back in out in the evenings to college. Her daughter was young at the time and didn't like her going.

'Mommy please don't go'

She was lucky that her husband was at home to mind their daughter, he was very supportive as was her son who was also studying at the time so understood the pressure Kathy was under with assignments.

Significant learning about self and society

For some of the participants the impact of returning to education went beyond 'personal development'. It gave them a new outlook on life. For them it was life changing. Some of them even named it calling their experience on the BA 'transformative'.

Mary who was out of the education system for over twenty years was unsure of her ability starting the degree. Completing it has made her aware of what's around her.

> *'It has broadened my horizons… it has opened my eyes and it has encouraged me to look a little bit deeper into what I already know'.*

Mags who comes from a socially disadvantaged background said the BA helped her recognise that there's a lot going on in the world around her.

> *'I was so closed off, unknown to myself you know, there's so much going on outside the bounds of --------where I am from'*

She feels that the BA gave her a whole new outlook on life.

> *'I would call this a transformative experience, I really would because other than the fact that it changed my perspective on things, it changed my perspective on my life'*

> *'You know I see the world completely different now in comparison to before I started the BA'*

This new outlook on life did bring its challenges as her relationships suffered as a consequence.

> *'I'm not saying the BA ended it. It just changed our relationship. Whether it was because I had a different perspective on life when I came in, and after the BA I seen life so differently. So, I don't know whether it was that, but it did change that relationship and it did change some of the friendships I had as well'*

Joe who through his work seen a lot of injustice and suffering during his lifetime feels that the BA gave him a new perspective and helped him to put things into context.

> *'It certainly makes me look at things differently, I've seen a lot, but I never put any of those social things into context'*

It has given him an insight to what social issues are happening around him and about what can be done to help.

> *'It certainly opened my eyes to a lot of social issues in Ireland, it opened my eyes to people that are struggling, but it also made me aware that there are things out there that you can do about it'.*

As a result, he has become more active in his local area volunteering his time to help others.

Ann see's the BA as a 'life changing' experience. Confidence was one huge area of growth for her, but it also gave her a different perspective on things.

'It opens up a total new world, and like you see yourself through a different lens, which really increases your self-esteem, it's your sense of identity, you're not just the Mammy'

'I didn't know it was going to be such a life changing experience. I definitely didn't think that it was going to impact on my confidence the way it did'

The knowledge and practices that Ann gained from the BA has not only impacted on her, but also on her workplace. Following the BA, Ann redesigned the 'train the trainer' course based on the principles of adult education. To this day those principles and that ethos are used in the centre. Ann has since left to set up her own training business. The confidence to do this comes from the BA.

'I would honestly say that my experience on the BA has shaped my business and the way I deliver training today'

Niamh's first experience of education was far from 'transformative'. She was told that she was 'lazy' and for her school 'was not a great place'. When she received her dyslexia diagnosis at forty-two, she knew that the supports she would receive were going to impact on her in a positive way. Following a conversation with one of the lecturer's at Maynooth where she was told that it was an actual disability, she felt good about it.

'It gave me permission to be loud and proud about being so dyslexic'

She liked the approach used by the adult education department and feels she benefitted from that.

'I think if I came to this at eighteen or nineteen, I wouldn't have got out as much as I did because I could kind of connect it with the real world'

Although Niamh identifies faults within the BA, she recognised the huge impact it has had on her life.

'It actually changed my own perception of my identity'

It changed how she lives her life, she now reads the paper differently, has more interest in the news, feels that she can ask questions, and form an opinion.

'I asked a hell of a lot more questions, it kind of gave me permission to take on that part of the brain. Instead of being just a nosy bitch, I was a nosy bitch who actually knew what I was talking about'

She feels empowered to challenge things that she feels are not right. In the past she would have just accepted things. Now she feels she can get involved in these conversations.

> *'I would be kinda able to say, like how do you know, have you considered or well how did you come to that'*

For Sinead the BA was at a 'changing point' in her life, she was recently separated, she was going to be made redundant, and a single parent. She feels it gave her a new outlook on life.

> *'You will learn to be able to see the society around you through a different lens, to be able to see it in a more objective lens and a more compassionate lens'*

She feels that before she would have been afraid to speak and voice her opinion. Whereas now she is more self-assured.

> *'It gives you an awareness, you learn to reflect, you learn critical reflection, you just don't information as a given, you look at who's giving you the information, the agenda'*

> *'I have been empowered to see myself in a different way'*

Kathy found that the BA gave her a new outlook on her workplace and helped her recognise what was going on in society. She liked the different approach used by adult education practitioners in the classroom versus the traditional 'banking' approach used in primary and secondary schools.

> *'It definitely made me look at the world differently. It definitely helped me understand my work situation and my colleagues. It helped me realise that there are many different ways to be educated'*

This approach helped Kathy to understand her own children's different experiences of education.

> '*I have another child who is rebelling against traditional education completely and I'm like okay, they're two different ways of learning and I just had to adjust to that instead of stressing over it. I'm just like. There are other ways' of learning'*.

Kathy's own mother had returned to education in her fifties and completed a degree and postgraduate studies. This was a huge influence on Kathy. Her mother was very proud of her decision to return to education and often proof-read her assignments. She knew how important

it was to her mother. When she visited her, she would often enquire about how she was getting on with her coursework.

> *'I was typing up my assignments and she was like 'tell me what you are doing' and yeah, you know it was so important to her. Yeah, she was so proud that I was doing it. I kind of thought I'll keep going because I suppose part of me was really doing it for my mum'*

Social Connection

Interestingly one of the most unexpected outcomes for the participants was making connections with other students.

Mag's had a wide network of friends coming into the BA. She seen the BA as a means to getting a better job. Friendship was something she didn't expect.

> *'I don't know what I thought I was going to get, I just thought I'd get a better job. I didn't realise that I would get lifelong relationship's'*

For Joe he enjoyed coming up for class in the evenings and meeting his fellow classmates.

> *'The positive aspects were the interactions with fellow students. I would say the friends you met'*

> *'I have built up a few friends that I keep in touch with'*

Mary who was very unsure of herself to start with thought she would struggle making friends.

> *'I increased my friend circle. So, I think I've made good friends for life. And I feel I am actually part of something even though I am not in Maynooth anymore.*

She was glad that doing the BA wasn't always about lectures and studying, it also had a social side.

> *'Being able to meet up with people, see how they were getting on, so it wasn't just always about the academic, we had a bit of a laugh, but while we were having a bit of a laugh we were also learning'.*

The BA students supported each other along their learning journey. Many of the students had been out of the education system for a long time and were struggling. Mag's was glad that of the friends that supported her.

> *'Because I could lean on them, you know build relationships with them'*

Some of the participants felt that they were the only ones that were finding it hard. They were glad to know they were not on their own. Joe found,

> *'I suppose like anything at the start it's a big, big thing to get into it and you are finding it hard, and everyone is in the same boat'*

Mary acknowledges the support that they gave each other. This really helped her as she was unsure of her ability coming onto the course.

> *'There was always somebody behind me to encourage me to let me know I could do that too'.*

Others who struggled with the course content were brought together by these struggles. Mag's found it tough at the start, upon talking to another student who was also struggling she realised she was not on her own and that it's ok to admit you are finding it hard.

> *'I think that actually drew us together, because she said is it just me or do you not know what's going on in these classes? I'm like yeah'*

They decided to stick it out and see how they got on in the summer term.

> *'Look we'll get to May get our results then if we pass, we'll go into the second year and if we don't' we'll drop out'*

Joe had to return after he submitted his thesis to complete a module due to a mix up on recognised prior learning. He found that tough as his network of friends had moved on. This impacted on his experience of his final year

> *'I missed the old buzz of the people we started with, but that's the way it is in everything'.*

The entire local and community studies BA group was small. Some of the modules were common modules so you mixed in with the history side. The modules often included group work this led to people from the local and community sides getting to know each other better. Kathy loved this aspect of the course.

'Yeah, I loved the collegiality of it all'

'The collaborative connections within the whole cohort'

In some ways the students felt that as they were part-time evening students they missed out on the 'college' experience. But in other ways this led them to get to know each other better. They were their own unique group within Maynooth University. Kathy really enjoyed the mix of students from local and community studies.

'It was different people, people with new stories and new backgrounds, and I just loved all that. It's just like a microclimate within the university'.

Although Mag's thought the atmosphere on campus was quiet in the evenings, she also recognises that this was a positive thing.

'It's so dead in the evenings, like in these buildings…. Maybe that why you get to know your colleagues, your class, your peers so well. Because it's just us, there's nothing really going on at that time.

Mary felt that the way the BA group did not mix with the other years in the first semester helped them to settle and become friends.

'*And I liked that because we were getting to know each other, so nobody else was in the mix. So, we kind of developed bonds there'*

Although she was initially hesitant about the approach to learning she now recognises the benefits.

'It wasn't just about learning. It was about putting yourself out there and it was about making friends and really, really, exposing who you are'.

Ann encouraged her work colleague to join the course. They both graduated on the same day, and she felt that as well as making friends on the course she was able to make connections with other people in the sector.

'I built up relationships and friendships and experiences that I wasn't expecting to have'

Sinead also speaks of the support that the BA students offered each other.

'We accompanied each other through the learning, this lifelong learning…we accompanied each other intimately you are sharing different parts of your lives'

Chapter 5 Discussion of findings

Introduction

This chapter will highlight my findings and then discuss them in relation to the literature outlined earlier in chapter two around policy and research from well-known experts in the field. The main themes that arose from the data were economic realities, motivation to learn, the effect on personal well-being, significant learning about the self and society and social connections.

At this stage of my research, I have to ask the question as to what has changed of the mature students college experience since Ted Fleming and Mark Murphy's Seminal report 'College Knowledge' (1997, p.18) where he found 'the three major issues or themes relating to mature student experience, financial issues, relationships and external commitments and the learning process'. Financial issues are still an issue, although only two out of the seven participants mention it in my study. This could be down to the mixed makeup of the BA another group of seven may give different findings. Relationship and external commitments again were a huge factor for my participants, with many finding the juggle of family life, work and study a challenge. These themes will be outlined in greater detail below. As my research focused on the non-academic experiences, the 'learning process' as outlined in College Knowledge didn't arise as a key theme from my findings.

Economic realities

Financial pressures were identified in the literature review as one of the biggest pressures on mature students. Interestingly in my research this was not the case for all of the participants. Because of the diverse background of the BA students, financial pressures were only an issue for two out of the seven participants.

The themes changed over the course of my research beginning with 'financial pressures' which evolved into 'economic realities'. When comparing my findings to the literature review, I realised that 'financial pressure' wasn't something that all of my participants faced. Each of them had their own 'economic reality'.

A significant proportion of the research on the mature student experience in higher education is taken from the perspective of students from 'working class backgrounds' or 'dis-advantaged' areas. My research is important as it gives an insight into a group of mature students from 'mixed socio-economic' backgrounds. Looking at research on mature students in Ireland such as Fleming & Murphy (1997) and Lynch & O'Riordan (1998) as outlined earlier, these both point to financial strains as one of the biggest barriers that adults face when returning to education, they see how 'economic constraints were identified as the principal barriers to equality of access and participation in higher education'. Interestingly during my analysis, financial pressures wasn't something that arose for everyone. While the analysis confirms that lack of finance can impact on one's experience of education, it didn't impact on everyone that I interviewed. Only two out of the seven participants mention it.

Mag's was from a socially disadvantaged area in Dublin. She knows that she could only afford to do the BA because at the time she did as she was still living at home with her parents. As well as the course fees Mag's mentioned the unexpected costs such as the cost of the toll bridge and having to take time off work unpaid to do the summer module. This backs Kearns (2014, p.95) study where he states that 'many students don't realise the true cost of participation and the considerable impact this can have on their lives'. Mag's acknowledges that there's no way she could afford to do it now as she was expecting her first child and had recently bought a home. Sinead was a single parent and recently separated she planned to enter teaching after the BA to give her more time at home with her son. She used her redundancy money to pay for the BA. She found that it wasn't as straightforward as she thought it would be. She was taking a risk hoping that it would pay off in the long term. As a single parent she had financial commitments already and found the course 'expensive'. As we know from research outlined earlier by Kearns (2014, p.95) 'students hold high expectations that their effort will result in financially rewarding jobs or careers, despite evidence to the contrary'. For the students it was a considerable amount of money to spend knowing that the outcome wasn't guaranteed. But from Kearns (2014) we also know that adult students are willing to take a risk and invest in education. The remaining five participants never mentioned financial pressures. Out of those Niamh who was a civil servant acknowledged that she was lucky that her workplace was paying her fees.

Motivation to learn

During the interviews many of the participants opened up about why they decided to do the BA. One of the more interesting themes for me in the findings was the matures students 'motivation to learn'. It was interesting to find that this decision to return to education was something that the participants held onto for a long time. Five of the seven participants mentioned this. They kept it at the back of their minds. This finding is backed up in the literature review by Kenny et al. (2010, p.110) who stated that 'the majority of participants expressed a long-standing inner desire to return to education, a sense of unfinished business'. Some participants such as Joe looked back and regretted not taking the opportunities for education when they were younger. For others it was down to life situations, they had to 'park' the idea for a while and return to it at a later stage.

For many the decision to return to education was a personal quest to fulfilment. This is also identified in Fleming et al. (1997, p.10) who found that 'students go to university in pursuit of knowledge, for some this is for their own delight and for others it is to enhance their job prospects'. To me this quote perfectly captures the range of motivations behind the decision to complete a BA at Maynooth University for my participants in this research.

The effect on personal well being

My findings went a bit deeper than personal development as outlined in the literature review and pointed to the 'effect on personal well-being'. Over the years research by Fields, Schuller and Merrill have brought awareness to the non-economic benefits of returning to education such as the effect on ones well-being. Indeed Fields (2011, p.17) stated that 'there are good reasons for considering well-being to be among the most important outcomes of adult learning'. Ones well-being is influenced by one's self-esteem and increased self-esteem was noted by Schuller et al. (2004, p.41), Field (2012, p.7) and Hammond (cited in Schuller et al. 2004, p.42) in the literature. My findings found my participants were no different with students mentioning increased confidence, finding their voice, self-knowledge, sense of achievement when asked about their experience of the BA. This supports Schuller et al. (2004, p.41) claim that 'increased self-esteem is probably the most universal and widely documented outcome of learning'. Many were unsure of their ability as they were out of the education system for a long time. This was

something that they didn't necessarily expect. Some had initially sought out academic qualifications, but the positive effect on well-being was an added bonus. For Mary who spent the previous twenty years raising her family it was something outside the home that was just for her. The course gave her more confidence. She felt she really gained from 'a personal point of view rather than an academic'. Joe was retired and didn't need it for a job, for him it was 'totally personal'. Each participant mentioned how the course was 'personal for them.

As in the literature many of the participants spoke about the negative impact the course had on their well-being. Those interviewed mentioned terms like, stress, pressure, running around, rushing, when asked how they managed their responsibilities outside the BA. This supports Fields (2012, p.7) claim that 'learning can be associated with stress and anxiety. All seven participants had family responsibilities. Referring back to College Knowledge, Fleming et al. (1997, p.21) noted how 'women were often pulled in many directions, having to play the role of worker, student, parent, wife, friends and homemaker'. Echoing an article by Field and Morgan Klein (2013) the female participants spoke about how they were still expected to do the majority of the housework and childrearing while studying. This was also evident from my own research with the participants mentioning the juggle or life and study, the guilt of leaving children behind, the impact on their marriages. Some also felt that they were unsupported at home. It also caused rows and resentment within the family Ann felt the BA had a negative impact on her marriage as her husband 'resented the time and energy I was putting into the BA'. Niamh found it took a while for her family to realise how important the BA was to her and to help her more around the house. Kathy found that around assignment time everything in the house was put on hold. She also felt guilty about leaving her daughter in the evenings to go to college as did Sinead who 'grieves for the time' when she had to leave her child at home. Although there are significant personal and professional gains to be made in returning to education one must also note that it's also a time that can bring huge challenges to the mature student.

Significant learning about the self and society

While the literature reviewed above around mature students returning to education mentions Mezirow's 'transformative learning experience', this was not a reality for all of my participants. Sure, it affected their lives but not all of these affects could be called transformative. That's

why I had to be careful as to what I called this theme. This third theme goes beyond the previous 'effect on personal well-being' and is known as 'significant learning about the self and society'.

Finnegan & Merrill (2017, p.320) stated that 'universities can act as a 'transitional space in which a persons' identity may be reflected upon re-shaped and transformed'. This stood up with my findings. During the analysis process I made notes of when the participants mentioned terms such as, a new outlook on life, broadened horizons, life changing, some even named it calling their experiences 'transformative'. These terms were beyond personal development and many of them admit that the BA changed their whole outlook on life. It opened their eyes not only to themselves but how to view the world around them.

Looking at the findings it's interesting to note that Mags who was from a 'disadvantaged area in Dublin' is the one student who refers to experience on the BA as 'transformative' repeatedly. Over the course of the BA, she began to recognise that there was so much more going on in the world around her that she didn't know about. She had to challenge herself to see beyond the 'bounds of' where she was from. This links in with Mezirow (1991, p.167) in the literature reviews where he sees 'perspective transformation as the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world'. Mag realised that her views of the world were constrained and influenced by where she came from and those around her. This of course was not an easy process, and this affected her relationship and friendships. This experience is re-iterated by Fleming et al. (1997, p.20) stating that 'college life can damage relationships', Field (2012, p.10) also notes how education can 'impact on their original social circle and it can disrupt bonding ties'.

As noted by Illeris (2014, p.91) mature students lead busy lives and many have 'more than enough to do to just get by practically and financially' and don't have time for 'self-actualisation'. This was also the case with my participant's with all of them at some stage noting the juggle of work, home life and study. They didn't have time to reflect on their learning journey. For the participants that didn't report 'transformation' many experienced a change in how they viewed themselves. Looking back to the literature where Illeris (2014, p.40) states that 'the concept of transformative learning compromises all learning that implies change in the identity of the learner'. My findings back this up with several of the participants mentioning a 'change' in themselves, 'It actually changed my own perception of my identity', 'it's your sense of identity, you're not just the Mammy', 'I have been empowered to see myself in a different way'. This change in the participants may not be 'transformative' but it's a change in

their view of themselves which is still significant. Doing the BA gave them this opportunity to change.

For other participants their experience led them to become more aware of what is going on around them in society. Joe became more involved in the local community and Faye became more aware of the injustice in society. The knowledge they gained on the BA helped them try make sense of the injustice around them. This again links back in with the literature where Schuller (2004, p.30) stated that 'education is not a shield that protects people from experience but is a means of managing the experience in some more or less purposive fashion'.

Social Connections

The final theme I am going to discuss is 'social connections'. For many gaining new friends and making connections with other people was an unexpected but welcome outcome.

At the start of this research process, I assumed that Bourdieu's definition of social capital would arise from my analysis. The participants didn't necessarily talk about making these connections to 'network' for their careers or to increase their cultural or economic capital. Fields (2003, p.143) concept of social capital as 'the resources that people derive from their relationships with others' is what I see as best relating to my participants experience.

From the outset people didn't necessarily join the BA to make friends. This is different to the literature where Svensson (1996 cited in Schuller & Desjardins, 2010, p.6) stated that 'at least thirty three percent of adults indicate that their motive for participating in study circles was to meet others', the participants in my research did not mention this. Their motivation to return was mostly personal and to gain an academic credential.

In the literature earlier Bailey et al. (2010, cited in Field 2011, p.19) found that there was a 'self -reported tendency among learner's to be willing to talk to new people'. The adult education approach to learning lent itself to building friendships in the classroom. Mary who was initially hesitant about this approach refers to this in the findings, 'it wasn't just about learning, it was about putting yourself out there and it was about making friends and really, really, exposing who you are'. It helped her to make connections with her classmates. Other's like how the classes were small and involved a lot of groupwork. Kathy thought that helped the classmates to know each other.

Most found 'support' through the connections they made on the course. Many were out of the education system for while and were unsure of their capabilities. Sharing their struggle with the course brought them closer as mentioned earlier in research by Schuller (2004) and Kilpatrick et al. (2003). This was mentioned by Mag's and Mary who noted how they were encouraged and supported by the other students on the BA. Mag's specifically mentioned how a friendship developed with another student on the BA over their shared struggles. Without this friendship she felt neither would have make it through the first year, 'I think that it actually drew us together, because she said to me is it just me or do you not know what's going on in these classes? I'm like yeah'. They decided to stick at it and see how they got on in the summer assignments which they both passed and thus continued onto second year. This also came up in Fleming & Murphy (1997, p.53) where it was noted that the students encouraged each other 'both personally and professionally'. Of course, it's not all positive as Schuller et al. (2004, p.122) found that education can 'lead to a dissolution and reconstruction of social networks and friendships'. My findings suggested the same with Mag's, noting the negative effects on her friendships.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the various themes that emerged from the findings of the research. It them discussed them in relation to the literature reviewed in chapter two.

Chapter 6 Conclusions & Recommendations

The aim of this research was to gain insight into the experiences and impacts of higher education on a group of mature students with a focus on the non-academic experiences.

This research has shown that overall, the students were positive about the BA. Terms such as life changing, transformative, confidence, empowerment came up in the findings. At some stage all of them struggled with the juggle of study and work or family life but overall, they all felt that the positives outweighed the negatives. Next to increased confidence and a new outlook on life, making connections with their fellow students was one of the most positive things that the students take with them from the BA.

The results from this research give us a good insight into the mature student experience of higher education. Using their voice gave me the 'inside view' of their experience. Outside factors such as work, family life, housework, relationships all had a baring on how they experienced higher education. Some were more impacted than others. By doing this research I can see the personal as well as academic gains that the students acquired along the way. I hope this leads to a greater understanding of the 'complex' lives of mature students and how they experience higher education. It is hoped that this work will contribute to knowledge in the field of adult education research and be of value to those who focus on the mature student experience.

Looking at limitations, the small sample size did not allow for a large-scale study, which would have given us richer data. However, in spite of the small numbers, I do believe that my study gave a good insight into the mature student experience.

Recommendations for further research would be, a greater focus on one's class and how that affects one's experience of higher education, this could also produce interesting data that could account for some of the findings in my own study. Also, a natural progression for this study would be to do a longitudinal study of how the mature student experience evolves from first year to graduation. The most important thing is for the student voice to remain central to the research.

Bibliography

Aontas (2021). Lifelong Learning for all In Ireland. Available at: <u>Aontas - Life Long Learning for All - Health and Wellbeing.pdf</u> [Accessed 20 June 2022].

Barone, C. (2006). "Cultural Capital, Ambition and the Explanation of Inequalities in Learning Outcomes: A Comparative Analysis", *Sociology (Oxford),* vol. 40, no. 6, pp. 1039-1058.

Boeren, E. (2009). Adult education participation: The Matthew principle. Filosofija Sociologija. 20. 154-161

Bourdieu, P., & L. P. D. Wacquant. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.

Bowen, G. A. (2006). 'Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, pp. 12–23.

Bowl, M. (2001). "Experiencing the barriers: non-traditional students entering higher education", *Research papers in education*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 141-160.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: a practical guide for beginners, Sage, Los Angeles.

Bryman, A. (2016). Social Research Methods, fifth edn. Oxford University Press, New York: Oxford.

Bryman, A. (2012). Social Research Methods, fourth edn. Oxford University Press, New York: Oxford.

Bynner, J., Schuller, T. and Feinstein, L., (2003). Wider benefits of education: skills, higher education, and civic engagement. Zeitschrift für Pädagogik 49(3), pp. 341-361

Chambliss, D.F. & Schutt, R.K. (2016). Making sense of the social world: methods of investigation, fifth edn. Sage, Los Angeles.

Cincinnato, S., Van Keer, H. & Valcke, M. (2016). "The influence of social background on participation in adult education: applying the cultural capital framework", *Adult education quarterly,* vol. 66, no. 2, pp. 143-168.

Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D. (2018). Research design: qualitative, quantitative & mixed investigation, fifth edn. Sage, Los Angeles.

Creswell, J.W., & Plano Clark, V.L. (2007). Designing and conducting mixed methods research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Desjardins, R. (2010). Participation in Adult Learning, Danish University of Education, Copenhagen, Denmark, Elsevier Ltd

DeWalt, K. M. & DeWalt, B. R. (2010). What is Participant Observation? in Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers.

EAEA (2021). Well-Being in learning brings return on investment. Available at: https://eaea.org/2021/12/03/well-being-in-learning-brings-return-on-investment/ [Accessed 29 June 2022].

Field, J. (2003). Civic engagement and lifelong learning: Survey findings on social capital and attitudes towards learning, *Studies in the Education of Adults*. vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 142-156.

Field, J. (2006). Lifelong Learning and the New Educational Order (2nd edition), Stoke on Trent: Trentham

Field, J. (2009). "Good for your soul? Adult learning and mental well-being", *International journal of lifelong education*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 175-191.

Field, J. (2011.) "Adult Learning, Health and Well-Being – Changing Lives", *Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education*, pp. 13.

Field, J., (2012). Is lifelong learning making a difference? Research-based evidence on the impact of adult learning. *In Second international handbook of lifelong learning* (pp. 887-897). Springer, Dordrecht.

Field, J. & Morgan-Klein, N. (2013), "Reappraising the importance of class in higher education entry and persistence", *Studies in the education of adults*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp.162-176

Finnegan, F., Merrill, B. and Thunborg, C., (2014). *Student voices on inequalities in European higher education*. London: Routledge

Finnegan, F. and Merrill, B., (2017). 'We're as good as anybody else': a comparative study of working-class university students' experiences in England and Ireland. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *38*(3), pp.307-324.

Finnegan, F. (2017). The Purpose of Access: Equality, Social Mobility and the Knowledge Economy, in Fleming et al. (ed) *Access and participation in Irish higher education* Palgrave Macmillan, London, England, pp.107-130.

Finnegan, F., Loxley, A., & Fleming, T. (2017)." The Purpose of Access: Equality, Social Mobility and the Knowledge Economy". *Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, pp. 107-130

Finnegan, F. (2019). "Freedom is a very fine thing": Individual and collective forms of emancipation in transformative learning. In T. Fleming, A. Kokkos, & F. Finnegan (Eds), *European perspectives on transformation theory* (pp. 43-57). Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.

Fleming, T., Loxley, A., Kenny, A. & Finnegan, F. (2010). "Where Next? A Study of Work and Life Experiences of Mature Disadvantaged Students in three Higher Education Institutions",.

Fleming, T., Loxley, A., Finnegan, F. & Shevlin, M. (2017). *Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp.23-44.

Fleming, T. (2018). Critical theory and transformative learning: Rethinking the radical intent of Mezirow's theory. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology*, 9(3), pp. 1.13.

Fleming, T. and Murphy, M. (1997). College Knowledge: Power, Policy, and the Mature Student experience at University, Maynooth: MACE.

Graham, H (2015). Re-engaging with education as an older mature student: Their challenges, their achievement, their stories. Master's Dissertation, Technological University Dublin.

Grix, J. (2002). "Introducing Students to the Generic Terminology of Social Research", Politics (Manchester, England), vol. 22, no.3, pp.175-186.

Hardiman, F. (2012). "Finding a voice: The experience of mature students in a college of further education", PhD thesis, Maynooth University, Maynooth. Available at: file:///C:/Users/admin/Desktop/Digiltal%20Literacy/F._Hardiman_Thesis.pdf [Accessed 15 March 2022].

HEA (Higher Education Authority) (2021). Study of mature student participation in higher education: What are the challenges? Recommendations for the future. Dublin: Stationary Office. Available at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/06/Study-of-Mature-Student-Participation-in-Higher-Education_June-2021.pdf [Accessed 20 June 2022].

Illeris, K. (2014). 'Transformative Learning and Identity', Journal of Transformative Education, 12(2), pp. 148-163.

Kearns, M. (2014). 'A Risk Worth Taking? A Study of Mature Students' Experiences in Two Irish Universities', Graduate Students' Union of the University of Dublin, Trinity College, Journal of Postgraduate Research; 13. 2014

Kearns, M. (2017). "Mature students in Irish higher education" in *Access and participation in Irish higher education* Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, pp. 177-195

Kenny, A., Fleming, T., Loxley A., Finnegan F. (2010). Where Next? A Study of Work and Life Experiences of Mature Students (incl. Disadvantaged) in Three Higher Education Institutions. Combat Poverty Agency.

Kilpatrick, S., Field, J., and Falk, I., (2003). Social Capital: An analytical tool for exploring lifelog learning and community development. British educational research journal, 29(3), pp. 417-433.

Laros, A., T. & Taylor, E.W. (2017). Transformative learning meets Bildung: an international exchange, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Loxley, A., Finnegan, F. & Fleming, T. (2017).” Access and Widening Participation Stories from the Policy Domain” in *Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, pp. 45-85

Lynch, K. & O'Riordan, C. (1998). "Inequality in Higher Education: a study of class barriers", *British journal of sociology of education*, vol.19, no. 4, pp. 445-478.

Lynch, K. & Baker, J. (2005). "Equality in education: An equality of condition perspective", *Theory and research in education*, vol.3, no. 2, pp. 131-164.

Maynard, M. (1994). Methods, practices, and epistemology. The debate about feminism and research, in Purvis, J. and M. Maynard. Researching Women's lives form a feminist perspective. London: Taylor & Francis. Available at: https://library.lincoln.ac.uk/items/126660 [Accessed 20 March 2022].

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). Qualitative research design: an interactive approach, 3rd edn, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Merrill, B. (2004)." Biographies, class and learning: the experiences of adult learners", Pedagogy, culture & society, vol. 12, no.1, pp.73-94.

Merrill, B., Finnegan, F., O'Neill, J. & Revers, S. (2020). "When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them': class and capitals in, and after, higher education", *Studies in higher education (Dorchester-on-Thames),* vol. 45, no.1, pp.163-175.

Mezirow, J. (1978). 'Perspective Transformation', *Adult Education*, 28(2), pp. 100–110

Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning.*1st edn, Jossey- Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions in adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative Learning: Theory to practice. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 74(Summer), pp.5-11.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as a discourse. *Journal of transformative education*, 1(1), pp.58-63.

OECD (2001). The Well-Being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital, OECD, Paris.

OECD (2004). Review of National Policies for Education: review of higher education in Ireland, OECD. Paris

Schuller, T., Preston, J., Hammond, C., Brassett-Grundy, A., Bynner, J. & Mellor, J. (2004). *The benefits of learning: the impact of education on health, family life and social capital.* London Routledge Falmer

Schuller, T. (2007). "Reflections on the use of social capital", *Review of social economy*, vol.65, no.1, pp. 11.28.

Schuller, T., & Desjardins, R. (2010). Wider benefits of adult education. In *International Encyclopedia of Education. UCLA*.

Schutt, R. K. (2012). Investigating the social world: the process and practice of research, seventh edn, Sage, Los Angeles.

Schutt, R. K. (2015). Investigating the social world: the process and practice of research, eighth edn, Sage, Los Angeles.

Suter, W. N. 2012. Qualitative Data, Analysis, and Design. In: 2012. *Introduction to Educational Research: A Critical Thinking Approach*, 2nd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. pp. 342-386 Available at: https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483384443.n12 [Accessed 29 Jun 2022].

Taylor, E.W., (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: A critical review of the empirical research (1999–2005). *International journal of lifelong education*, *26*(2), pp.173-191.

Taylor, E.W. & Cranton, P. (2013). "A theory in progress? Issues in transformative learning theory", *European journal for research on the education and learning of adults,* vol. 4, no.1, pp. 33-47.

UNESCO (2016). The 3rd GRALE: Global Report on Adult Learning and Education. Available at: https://uil.unesco.org/adult-education/global-report/third-global-report-adult-learning-and-education-grale-3 [Accessed 19 June 2022].

UNESCO (2018). 3 questions on flexible learning pathways in higher education. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Arns2xrcj1E&t=1s [Accessed 19 June 2022].

Maynooth University
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Purpose of the Study.

I am Lisa Hennessy, a master's student, in the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. As part of the requirements for the Master's in Community and Adult Education, I am undertaking a research study` under the supervision of Dr. Fergal Finnegan. The study is concerned with how returning to education to complete a BA at Maynooth University impacted on the lives of students that graduated from the course.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve me interviewing past graduates of the BA who are willing to participate in the research. Each interview will last approximately forty-five minutes.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked because to take part as you are a graduate of the BA. As a researcher I recognize the importance of hearing directly from the student. I want the students voice to be central to my research.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, we hope that you will agree to take part and give us some of your time to participate in a one-to-one interview.

If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records.

If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings are published. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with Maynooth University.

What information will be collected?

I am using interviews to collect data for my research. The questions are designed around my research question looking at 'how returning to education to complete a BA at Maynooth University impacted on the lives of students' that graduated from the course.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names will be identified at any time. No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give?

The interviews will be recorded using the Otter app, then transcribed and analysed for common themes. All the information you provide will be kept on my password protected PC. All the participants names and names mentioned in the interview will be anonymized. On completion of the research, the data will be retained by Maynooth University for marking and destroyed after the designated period of time set out by the University.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and presented as a thesis. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part in the research, but some may find it difficult to talk about how returning to education impacted on their life.

What if there is a problem?

At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. You may contact my supervisor Fergal Finnegan (fergal.finnegan@mu.ie) if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can contact me:

Lisa Hennessy, (086) 3843836, lisahennessy.2017@mumail.ie .

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Consent Form

I…………………………………………………………….…agree to participate in Lisa Hennessy's research study titled 'How returning to education to complete a part-time BA impacted on the lives on a group of non-traditional students at Maynooth University'.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my interview with Lisa Hennessy to be audio recorded ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data up to (insert date) ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

Signed……………………………………………………..
    Date………..……………………….

Participant Name in block capitals

……………………………………..

Appendix B

<u>**Interview Questions**</u>

1. **Can you tell me a little about yourself?**

2. **What brought you to the BA in the first place?**

3. **How would you describe your experience on the BA?**

4. **What motivated you during the BA?**

5. **Did these motivations change during the BA?**

6. **What impact has the BA had on your life?**

7. **Did it impact other areas, family, work, friendships**

8. **Have there been negative impacts from returning to education to complete the BA?**

9. **Apart from the academic qualifications is there anything else that you feel you gained from completing the BA?**

10. **Looking back now --- years after graduation did you get from the BA what you initially set out to get?**

11. **Is there anything that you feel I missed out on in order to best capture the students experience of the BA?**

12. **Is there anything else you would like to add?**

13. **Would you be open to me coming back to you if something arose?**