Unlocking the Ivory Tower: Exploring the Barriers to Postgraduate Education for Ireland's Older Generation.

AD610

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing population of older adults in Ireland and the various initiatives by educational establishments and third-level institutions to encourage more post-retirement engagement of older adults in academic activities, the number that engages in formal postgraduate education is discouraging. Copious amounts of contemporary and worldwide research highlight numerous barriers and other factors that inhibit gerontological access to various learning activities – even at the undergraduate level. Unfortunately, none focuses specifically on the engagement of older adult learners in postgraduate study and statistics for those over retirement age are scant. Using a mixed-method approach employing both quantitative and qualitative analyses, this project sets out to identify why the participation rates of this cadre of older adults are so low and what can be done to address the situation. Findings reveal that the issues involved are multifaceted, with age being one of the major barriers responsible.

Keywords: Educational Gerontology; older adults, postgraduate education, Transformative Learning, Lifelong learning.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AONTAS	National Adult Learning Organisation.
CARDI	Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland.
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training.
DOH	Department of Health.
CSO	Central Statistics Office.
EAEA	European Association for the Education of Adults.
EU	European Union.
HEA	Higher Education Institution.
ICSG	Irish Centre for Social Gerontology.
IIRE	Indecom International Research Economists.
ISCED	International Standards Classification for Education.
UIS	Institute of Statistics.
LFS	Labour Force Survey.
NAP	National Action Plan.
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation.
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications.
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.
RPEL	Recognition for Prior Experiential Learning.
RPL	Recognition for Prior Learning.
SOLAS	Further Education and Training Authority.
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland.
TILDA	The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing.
TL	Transformative Learning.
U3A	University of the Third Age.
UIS	Institute of Statistics.
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
WHO	World Health Organisation

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Chapter Six—Recommendations and Conclusions: This section will offer recommendations and conclusions based on the findings to suggest an alternative solution to address the issues raised in addressing the research question.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

No globally agreed standard defines old age or determines when one is classed as 'elderly', 'geriatric,' 'senior citizen,' 'older adult,' 'pensioner', or 'aged.' These are all subjective terms under the broad umbrella of adult education and are based on various connotations that include culture, location, life expectancy, and state of health. At a basic level, these terms allude to the range of ages at the end of lifelong learning for persons nearing and surpassing life expectancy. In Ireland, the qualifying age for all State Pensions is sixty-six. However, for this research, the term "older adult" will refer to someone aged sixty and over. This will be my target group, and those aiming to engage in full- or part-time postgraduate degree programmes at Maynooth University or any other university in Ireland are expected to meet the qualifying criteria to study at the postgraduate level. One does not wake up one morning and decide on postgraduate study without the relevant minimum qualifications. The main unifying themes for this research will be ageing and learning. The interplay of the underlying relationships between these two major themes as they relate to older adult engagement in postgraduate study in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) will include educational gerontology, older adult and lifelong learning, and postgraduate and transformative learning.

1.2 Context and background information:

Before commencing this Master of Education degree, I had already completed two other one-year full-time certificate courses with this university. During this period, I found it disconcerting that very few older adults I assumed were students I could recognise and identify as being in the 60 and above age group. Even during both courses I attended, I was the oldest student. During class interactions, I also learned that almost all the other participants were employed and focused on career progression. Many also had as much as three decades of working life ahead of them. Since they were in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, I was the only older adult and a pensioner to boot in each of these adult education certificate courses. While they all had perfectly valid reasons for availing of these courses, I was neither there for career

advancement nor future employment aspirations but purely for the pleasure of learning, not only from an epistemological perspective but also as a dedicated epistemophilic pensioner.

Many of my coursemates found it challenging to understand why I was in class when I could enjoy my retirement (and so-called 'twilight' years) in a less stressful environment, with assignments to submit to deadlines and the commute to evening classes that ended at 10:00 pm. Once I explained to them that I had a lengthy experiential background in education, as well as an innate and passionate interest in acquiring knowledge for the pleasure it gives me, and that I saw myself as having fun every time I came to class, they eventually began to understand my perspective to learning. Nevertheless, I initially felt slightly embarrassed being the oldest student in the class. During this period, I began to contemplate a possible research question. However, it was not until I had almost completed the last course that I decided that I wanted to progress to a Master's degree and while preparing a proposal, I came up with the question, why do higher education institutions in Ireland have such low rates of gerontological participant (60 and above) engagement in postgraduate education? This also raised sub-questions like, what are the factors responsible for this situation, and how can issues identified be addressed? Can any benefits be derived from addressing this situation?

1.3 The problem being addressed:

After I started this course, I formed the habit of spending part of my breaks outside the classroom observing people (mostly young students) on campus. When previously, I had been attending evening classes, this time, the seriousness and the significance of my research were glaring. In the stark light of day, with thousands of students on campus, there was hardly anyone I could identify as being in their 60s. I felt like an academic dinosaur and embarrassed to be on campus for months. Could this be one of the reasons why so few older adults were on campus? Furthermore, for the few who were there, how many would be engaged in full-time postgraduate study? Most of the students I saw were young enough to be my grandkids (I have grandchildren in their 20s and two great-grandchildren to boot). The situation was much more severe than I had initially thought, and the significance of my research project dawned on me.

Initial desk research revealed that the issue was not specific to Maynooth University or Ireland and that other universities and countries faced the same problem.

Several universities and educational institutions in Ireland have policies and programmes aimed at encouraging older adults to engage in further learning opportunities at the undergraduate level. These include the University of the Third Age (U3A). This organisation provides educational opportunities for people over fifty-five years of age (The 'Third Age' being a period in life in which full-time employment has ceased), the "Pathways to Learning" programme of Trinity College Dublin (TCD), which provides courses and workshops for people over the age of fifty-five and the University College Dublin's (UCD) Access to Lifelong Learning programme for mature students. While gerontological research relating to older adult participation in postgraduate programmes is integrated into some postgraduate education programmes, these initiatives do not specifically address, and have done little to increase, the number of older adults availing of postgraduate study. This discovery raised further underlying questions, such as what these other universities and countries were doing to come up with solutions to the problem and what Irish universities could learn from these.

1.4 Purpose, scope and significance of my study:

While Maynooth University welcomes mature students (those at least 23 years of age when they start their course), there appears to be no specific age range that identifies a student as an older adult learner other than lumping everyone over the age of 23 as 'mature students'. Nevertheless, it would be safe to assume that the older the age range of students, the fewer their presence when it comes to full-time postgraduate degree study. This assumption is given greater credibility by the claim of the Mature Student Officer that only about two hundred mature students are admitted each year (Sheerin, 2023, p. 3). Unfortunately, despite claims of being a market leader in attracting and retaining mature students, the success rate regarding older adults, especially those approaching or exceeding state pension age, has not been very promising. Despite several support resources and initiatives provided by the university, such as the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), counselling services,

childcare services, assistance with coursework, financial aid, and the like, there has been extraordinarily little progress in improving and increasing access to full-time postgraduate opportunities for this cadre of adult learners. Concepts began to develop to find answers to the various questions raised. These included roles played by themes such as gerontology, educational gerontology, lifelong learning, older adult learning, postgraduate education, and TL. (Sahin, Erisen, & Celikoz, 2016; King, 2002; Kitchenham, 2008).   I believed I had to examine these themes concerning their significance and contributions to answering my initial research question and the related sub-questions.

1.5 Rationale

This research is necessary and significant because it sets out to try and identify why so few older adults aged sixty and above (including pensioners like me) are engaging in postgraduate degree study in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) despite the various resources (including financial) and other incentives available to them. It may also explain why I encounter few students within my age group on the University campus. It will identify any barriers to participation that may reveal why participation rates are so low. It is hoped that it will also determine the benefits of participation and other motivational factors that may influence their decision to engage in further postgraduate study.   It is easy to assume that the emphasis by national and international educational bodies and policymakers is on the younger cohort of students who may later be able to contribute to society as active workforce and tax-paying individuals to replenish the workforce rather than on much older adults who may not prove attractive to potential employers postgraduation. Tucket and Boulton-Lewis (2015) emphasised the importance of confronting the preconceptions and misconceptions that hinder older adults from participating in learning activities. These include the misconception that they cannot learn or that learning no longer applies to their lives. (Tuckett & Boulton-Lewis, 2015).

The potential audience for my research findings and conclusions will be other interested students and researchers within the university and elsewhere, including international researchers and even Interested public members. My audience will also

include members of the university's academic and relevant administrative communities. My findings and conclusions should identify ways to address this situation and proffer appropriate solutions. I hope that some of my life experiences will permeate this study. I have a healthy background in education and an extensive work-related history within the adult education domain. As a former tutor, I have taught nationally and internationally at various second-level and tertiary institutions, primarily in adult education settings. My life experiences and professional career have given me a wealth of information I can draw upon, even concerning adult studies for older people.

1.6 The Concept of Lifelong Learning

Both my ontological and epistemological perspectives on ageing and learning, which I see as intertwined, align with the concept of lifelong learning being continuous throughout life and an essential component in preserving the competencies of older adults. Ageing is a fact. As we go through life, we learn along the way, and it does not always have to be academic, as we all learn differently. This includes formal, non-formal, and informal learning experiences, the differences between which Phillips, Ajrouch, Hillcoat-Nalletamby (2010) lucidly describe as follows:

> Formal types of lifelong learning are best exemplified by schooling that takes place from pre-school to university and are found in programmes where evaluation of learning is central to the process. Non-formal types are structured learning opportunities, organised with intentional goals and topics, which occur outside traditional educational institutions and do not include an evaluation component to the activity. Informal types come about from simply living and happen in the course of daily activities (Phillips et al., 2010, p. 145)

The significance of these definitions concerning older adult participation in various learning activities, including postgraduate programmes at the tertiary level, will become more apparent during this research topic.

The concept of lifelong learning is based on the Delors Report (Delors, 1996) for the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. This document

significantly impacted education policies globally, its key influence lying in its holistic approach to education, emphasising four pillars of education, namely:

1. **Learning to Know**: Encouraging critical thinking, creativity, and knowledge acquisition.
2. **Learning to Do**: Fostering practical skills, problem-solving, and adaptability.
3. **Learning to Be**: Nurturing personal development, values, and self-awareness.
4. **Learning to Live Together**: Promoting social cohesion, empathy, and intercultural understanding (Delors et al., 1996, p. 85)

The report argues that lifelong learning should be the keystone for education policies, fostering learning throughout life for individuals and societies. It reflects this vision and its implications for global education, shaping educational reforms and emphasising lifelong learning. SOLAS (2021) supports these objectives, positing that

> Lifelong learning lies at the heart of Ireland's and the EU's education/training policy and is acknowledged as being vital for sustainable economic growth, the restoration of employment, and fostering social cohesion (SOLAS, 2021, p. 20)

Governments and organisations have incorporated these principles into curricula, teacher training, and lifelong learning initiatives, and SOLAS confirmed that

> lifelong learning is measured in both Ireland and the EU by using the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to calculate the share of adults aged 25-64 who had engaged in formal and/or nonformal learning (SOLAS, 2021, p. 2)

Unfortunately, this does not go far enough as it excludes statistics for older adult learners aged sixty-five and above, especially those attending postgraduate courses in HEIs. Since the report, the concept of lifelong learning has evolved significantly. Hošnjak et al. (2020) viewed it as "a tool that enables an active post-retirement period to enhance cognitive mental capacities, prevent dementia, and overcome the intergenerational gap." (p. 122). However, also relevant for older adult learners aspiring to postgraduate endeavours is integrating technology, using digital platforms, online courses, and mobile apps to enhance the accessibility and flexibility of education. The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) option is also relevant as it formally recognises skills acquired outside traditional education, an option that proved

beneficial during my postgraduate study application. This was because, even though I had a primary degree that would have qualified me for admission (under normal circumstances), for fee grant purposes, this qualification had to be within the previous four years and, as an older adult learner (almost 70), mine was over 40 years ago. Fortunately, I qualified for fee grant approval. I was admitted to Maynooth University's Adult and Community Education postgraduate programme based on the Recognition for Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) option and my career background.

Older adults over 60 can engage in active ageing and remain employed for longer, with people living longer and in better health. Considering this, Istance (2015) believes that active ageing rather than lifelong learning represents a more promising embracing framework for developing learning in retirement and old age. He asserts that:

> Many older adults are now engaged in the labour market for much longer than the conventional retirement age and to this extent vocationally-relevant learning is within our orbit. It will be argued that the period of our lives referred to here as retirement is one in which 'learning to be' should be central. (Istance, 2015, p. 225)

However, this should not rule out older adult learners engaging in further learning activities, including those attending tertiary institutions for postgraduate study. I am acutely aware that implementing lifelong learning initiatives faces several challenges, especially those relating to the learning needs of older adult learners like me. These include ensuring equal access to learning opportunities for all, regardless of socio-economic status, location, or background, bridging the digital gap and providing technology infrastructure for remote learning, keeping older adult learners motivated and engaged throughout their lives, and securing sustainable funding for lifelong learning programs. The European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), UNESCO, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other bodies contribute significantly towards achieving most of these goals, as do the lifelong learning policies of governments globally. Despite this, the number of academic activities available at the postgraduate level remains low and speaking of my experience and observations during the three years I have spent in the School of Education; this is a self-verified fact.

A probable reason for this is that educational opportunities for individuals over 60 may not be economically viable and could be perceived as yielding low returns on investment. Despite all the documentation and rhetoric, there seems to be an underlying, unspoken discriminatory social and economic discourse that dominates the educational engagement of older learners at higher degree levels. Istance (2015) opined that the notion that

> older adults and the elderly might be priority groups for organised learning, including but not only through conventional education offers, goes strongly against the grain of social convention (Istance, 2015, p. 225)

Then again, the low number of older and possibly retired learners wishing to engage in postgraduate study may be due to their lack of interest, the belief that they could be better engaged in other less demanding cognitive pursuits, or even because they cannot see how it will benefit them given their age. In a report by AONTAS (2022), a negative correlation between age and participation rates was revealed regarding lifelong learning participation. It asserted that as age increases, participation rates in lifelong learning decrease to 48% for those aged 55 years and over. While it applies to adults over 23, the survey is limited to marginalised groups and those with disabilities. The term "mature student" does not appear to extend to those in their sixties. However, I believe that learning never stops, and the adage, "a fool at forty is a fool forever," no longer (and never did) holds. Nevertheless, the illusions of equity and equality indeed directly target older adults.

1.7 The role of Educational Gerontology

Gerontology is the multidisciplinary study of ageing and a broad field covering issues related to older adults. It includes the biological, sociological, and psychological changes that older adults go through as they get older. The early 20th century saw its emergence as a distinct scientific field, and notable figures, such as Elie Metchnikoff (1903), named it an emerging academic discipline (Metchnikoff, 1903). He also contributed significantly to the early understanding of ageing, emphasising biological and genetic factors (Phillips et al., 2010). However, one should be careful not to confuse the term with geriatrics, which is more about old age's gradually debilitating physical, mental, and medical effects on an individual. The words are neither

synonymous nor interchangeable, geriatrics being a speciality in medicine that focuses on older adult care, including the study of disease and illness in the elderly. This study is more within the field of educational gerontology (Peterson, 1976; Peterson, 1980; Glendenning & Battersby, 1990; Glendenning, 1997; Garrison, 1997; Formosa, 2011. 2014, 2021), and its focus will be on older adult learners above sixty,

The term was first used in a 1970 doctoral program at the University of Michigan to denote those "activities and study that occur at the interface of education and gerontology" (Peterson, 1980, p. 68; Glendenning F. , 1997; Boulton-Lewis G. M., 2010). It received academic acceptance some years after the first issue of the international journal *Educational Gerontology* was published, in which the term "educational gerontology" was defined as the

> study and practice of instructional endeavors for and about aged and aging individuals. It can be viewed as having three distinct, although interrelated, aspects: (1) educational endeavors designed for persons who are middle aged and older; (2) educational endeavors for a general or specific public about aging and older people; and (3) educational preparation of persons who are working or intend to be employed in serving older people in professional or paraprofessional capacities. (Peterson, 1976, p. 62)

It is a more specialised subfield within gerontology that specifically addresses the educational aspects of ageing. The field later became associated with lifelong learning, emphasising the importance of ongoing education for personal development and acknowledging the necessity for tailored learning approaches that address older adults' diverse needs, interests and learning preferences.

Educational gerontology contributes significantly to enhancing the welfare of elderly adults. In the 1970s and 1980s, it emerged as a distinct field of study. Researchers and educators focused on developing educational programs and strategies that improve older adults' cognitive, social, and emotional well-being. This development coincided with the ageing of the population in many industrialised nations. The history of educational gerontology in Ireland can be traced back to the early 1980s when the first dedicated programs emerged. These programs primarily focused on training professionals working with older adults, such as nurses, social workers, and activity coordinators. In the 1990s, there was a growing recognition of the need for lifelong learning opportunities for older adults. This led to innovative programs like the

University of the Third Age (U3A) movement, which provides non-credit courses and workshops for older adults. In recent years, there has been continued growth in the field of educational gerontology in Ireland. This is partly due to the country's ageing population and a growing awareness of the importance of lifelong learning for all ages. Today, several universities and colleges in Ireland offer programs in educational gerontology, and the field is making a significant contribution to the lives of older adults in Ireland. Educational gerontology can help older adults stay engaged, active, and healthy in later life by providing opportunities for learning and development. This project is more aligned with educational gerontology, lifelong learning and later life learning in its bid to identify why so few older adult learners engage in postgraduate degrees in higher education institutions.

1.8 The role of Transformative Learning (TL) theory.

Mezirow was a TL theorist who focused on adult learning and development and whose ideas are relevant and valuable to elucidate my understanding of why older adult learners (sixty and above) may want to engage in any form of postgraduate study in the first place. His theory is essential for my research because it helps explain how older adults engage in postgraduate education, given that many "older adults do not necessarily gravitate towards structured learning environments to participate in lifelong learning" (Phillips et al., 2010, p. 146). It also explains the mental and cognitive processes they may experience and the barriers they face before making that all-important decision to return to education, especially at the postgraduate level. They may also change significantly in adapting to new academic challenges and perspectives. McCormick (2017) noted that for some older adults with the motivation to learn and a genuine interest in research and intellectual exploration

> engaging in postgraduate study may hold significant appeal as it provides them with the opportunity for further education and personal development. (McCormick, 2017, p. 78).

Older adults also benefit from being self-directed learners, setting goals, seeking resources, and taking responsibility for their intellectual development. They should be encouraged to view learning as a continuous lifelong process that enhances and

contributes to personal development. Mezirow's ten-phase TL) theory (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19) focuses on adult learning and development. It offers a valuable framework for understanding and supporting the educational experiences of older adults in postgraduate settings.

Mezirow described TL as

> the process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way in which we perceive our world, of reconstituting that structure in a way that allows us to be more inclusive and discriminating in our integrating of experience and to act on these new understandings. ((Mezirow, 1985, p. 22).

TL theory supports the concepts of Andragogy, which Knowles described as "the art and science of helping adults learn." (Knowles, 1980, p. 38), and self-directed learning (SDL) (Tough, 1971; Mezirow, 1985; Brookfield, 1985; Merriam S. , 2001). Its goals "include helping learners develop the capacity for self-direction, supporting transformational learning, and promoting emancipatory learning and social action." (Merriam S. , 2001, p. 9). Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of learners actively engaging in critical reflection and taking ownership of their learning process (King, 2002; Kitchenham, 2008; Sahin, Erisen, & Celikoz, 2016).

Critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990; 2009; Brookfield, 1995) is essential in transformative learning, enabling individuals, such as older adult learners aspiring to engage in postgraduate study, to reconsider and change their perspectives. It differs from everyday reflection because it involves a deliberate and systematic process of questioning and analysing one's sometimes long-held assumptions, beliefs, and experiences. Boud, Keogh and Walker described reflection as "an important human activity, in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over, evaluate it" (1985, p. 9). Ennis described critical reflection as "critical thinking, " which is "reasonable reflective thinking focussed on deciding what to believe or do." (Ennis, 2018, p. 166). It is triggered by an initial "disorientating dilemma." (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19), a sudden onset of cognitive dissonance that shakes one's established belief systems and ways of thinking and without which there can be no critical reflection,

Disorienting dilemmas are highly individual and subjective. What may be disorienting for one person may not be for another. For example, one morning, I woke up to find

that my employment and social status had changed, and I was now officially an old-age pensioner – thankfully, minus the walking stick. This was a disorientating dilemma. After over forty years of working, I suddenly had nowhere to go, prompting reflection on my self-worth and denting my self-esteem. This led me to critically reflect on the options available before I could gradually come to terms with my new situation. Sahin, Erisen, & Celikoz (2016) explained that in TL theory

> learning occurs in one of four ways: by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of mind (Sahin, Erisen, & Celikoz, 2016, p. 304)

Following discourse with family and friends, I began to transform my perspective. This led to a reappraisal of my situation, resulting in the transformative learning decision to reengage in postgraduate education. I am well aware that in a collaborative and supportive learning environment, interacting with peers and tutors, sharing experiences, and participating in group activities, I can enhance my transformative learning journey.

Critical reflection is a central part of this transformative learning process, without which there can be no perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 2009; Brookfield, 1995). Mezirow described this as

> the process by which we become more critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world. By changing these structures of habitual expectation, we can make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

Without perspective transformation, there can be no transformative learning. I believe that not all learning is transformative. Learning can only be considered transformative if it involves fundamentally questioning or reordering how one thinks or acts. Furthermore, reflection alone does not result in transformative learning unless the process involves critical reflection. Mezirow's emphasis on critical reflection, perspective transformation, and transformative learning aligns well with the challenges and opportunities that older learners may encounter. It can help them reevaluate and

reinterpret their experiences, beliefs, and critical assumptions before taking the plunge into postgraduate study, full-time or otherwise.

However, not everyone may explicitly recognise or label their thinking as critical reflection, and most individuals experience these processes without consciously recognising them, as I have done for many decades. However, lack of awareness of these terms does not diminish the potential for personal development and transformative learning. Older adults in postgraduate education can benefit from reflecting on their prior experiences, connecting them to new knowledge, and identifying the assumptions that underlie their beliefs. This reflective process can enhance their ability to learn and adapt more intentionally and informally. Mezirow's TL theory provides a valuable framework for understanding and supporting the educational experiences of older adults in postgraduate settings,

Nevertheless, the TL process may not be feasible for all older adults, especially those facing financial, health, digital literacy or exclusion, or other personal challenges, as well as those who may not see themselves as capable of self-directed learning regarding postgraduate study. Due to age, others may not see any point in pursuing further education or may even not meet the qualifying criteria for postgraduate study. Mezirow's TL theory (2009) While highlighting relevant processes towards TL, it appears to favour the mature adult under fifty-five group and does not expressly or significantly contribute to the underlying causes of why HEIs have such low rates of gerontological (the over-60s) participation in postgraduate education.

(Tam, 2013) observed that as

> the world is experiencing an unprecedented ageing of its population in both developed and developing countries, one of the challenges for governments is to put in place policies and provisions to enable elders maintain a positive quality of life by ageing successfully. (Tam, 2013, p. 281)

 Unfortunately, a prevalent bias in research on older individuals is the emphasis on the working-age population. For instance, two notable global studies, the Adult Education Survey (AES) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adults Competencies (PIAAC), do not sample respondents over the age of sixty-five mainly because it would impose restrictions on analysis as "the subsample of older people is

rather small." (Wiest, et al., 2019, pp. 293-294). Fortunately, several studies bear testimony to the fact that learning plays a significant part in preserving cognitive functioning and capability even in old age (Glendenning F. , 1997; Tam, 2013; Ardelt, 2000; Dench & Regan, 2000; Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006; Boulton-Lewis et al., 2010; Boulton-Lewis et al., 2012).

A related study by Bynner and Parsons (2002) also suggests that "older learners can derive significant benefits from participation in adult learning, including increased social connectedness, improved cognitive function, and enhanced life satisfaction", which may help to delay or prevent the onset of dementia and cognitive decline (Li, Lindenberger, & Sikstrom, 2011; Merriam & Kee, 2014). Gerontological education offers a wide range of additional advantages. (Groombridge, 1982) identified a total of five:

> to promote self-reliance independence, to enable older people to cope more effectively, to boost their confidence in society, to encourage older persons to impart their experiences to each other and to other generations and finally, to enhance self-actualisation (Groombridge, 1982; in Formosa, 2021, p. 412)

Since education significantly impacts older adults' health, well-being, and quality of life, policies providing free or heavily subsidised adult education opportunities could improve health and well-being outcomes. Hakim (2016) observed that such policies "could help to address age-related inequalities in health and well-being and improve the quality of life for older people." (Hakim, 2016, p. 181).

For the 'younger' older adults who may still have many years of potential labour in the tax-paying workforce before retiring, this could also increase participation and potential economic benefits for the state. (Mullen & Berryman, 2018) The idea that older adults participating in education and learning activities "may also have greater economic security and financial independence due to increased workforce participation and improved job prospects" is supported. (Mullen & Berryman, 2018, p. 1235). Studies reveal that the better educated they are, the longer they are expected to live (OECD Indicators, 2015). Enhancing lifelong learning opportunities can enhance the employability of older workers and mitigate the danger of social isolation (OECD,

2020). However, information is critical here, and the target groups must know the available options and opportunities.

1.9 Barriers to Participation

This section will identify many prominent reasons why older adults' participation rates in postgraduate study, especially full-time, are so low. It will also highlight how I was affected by some of them. Their documentation describes the difficulties encountered in improving higher education participation. Fleming, et al.(2017) commented that:

> One of the most enduring concepts in the access story is that of barrier. There are barriers to access, barriers to WP, barriers to learning, barriers to finance and barriers to childcare. (Fleming, Loxley, & Finnegan, 2017, p. 6)

There are also barriers to older adult engagement with tertiary education at the postgraduate level. I am an independent researcher and identify as an older adult learner, like the sample group I am studying. I am also a full-time postgraduate degree student and a pensioner curious as to why there appears to be a shortage of much older learners within the Maynooth University campus, especially among a sea of much younger students. Why is this so? I shall be relating some of the identified barriers below regarding the participation of older adults in HEIs to my experience as an older adult learner. While official statistics refer to mature students identified as adults over 23, unfortunately, most available statistics on mature and older adult participation do not go further than 64. I will be 70 on my next birthday, and there are no relevant statistics for older adult learners in my age range (65 to 70). It soon became apparent that the older the adult learner, the lower the number participating in higher academic pursuits, much less undergraduate study. The highest number of participants was within the age range of 30-54, and the numbers dwindled dramatically the higher the age range of participants. There are several reasons for this development, many of which are out of the control of most Third level institutions. Some of these will be addressed below.

1.9.1 Financial constraints.

A copious amount of research internationally has exposed age-related barriers for older adults to engage in further learning opportunities (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Gorard, 2010). Hošnjak, et al (2020) observed that:

> The biggest obstacles for older people when it comes to participating in lifelong learning programs are finances, physical illness, and a lack of understanding from their family members and the broader society for this kind of activity (Hošnjak et al., 2020, p. 122)

The first of these obstacles revealed that this was a primary concern for many older adults aspiring towards graduate and postgraduate study. However, this was not the case for me. In general, older adults (including pensioners) may be unable to afford tuition fees, textbooks, on-campus snacks, beverages and lunch, or other associated costs. I was lucky to be approved for fees and maintenance grants from the Student Universal Services Ireland (2024), the awarding authority for further and higher education grants.

> SUSI offers funding to eligible students in approved full-time courses at PLC, undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Ireland and, in some cases, to students studying in the UK or EU. (SUSI, 2024)

It was welcome news when I was approved for a grant, even though I had already set aside fees for the course from targeted savings if I had not been approved, and as I had no debts, my weekly pension was enough for my basic needs. Nevertheless, financial constraints (Connolly & Daly, 2019; Mullen & Berryman, 2018; Johnson & Dinh, 2019; Miller & Wilson, 2017) were a specific barrier that kept emerging in research.

For many older adults (mainly pensioners), the cost of education can be a significant barrier due to limited financial resources, despite free tuition fees and other incentives for full-time postgraduate courses. The Central Statistics Office (2022) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC) revealed that 20% of people in Ireland aged 65 and older are at risk of poverty, and this number increased to one in three for those living alone (CSO, 2022). Active Ireland (2023) also revealed that almost 3 in 5 older people living on a State pension cannot afford to participate in life as much as they

would like. Even with reduced tuition fees or scholarships, the associated costs of textbooks and travel expenses can make it challenging to attend classes, especially if the distance to travel is discouraging. While these figures do not augur well for the elderly and other older adults who could qualify to participate in further education activities at the postgraduate level, free access, in the form of fees, grants, and scholarships, should prove attractive, but only if they are aware of those resources. However, Fleming et al. (2017) argue that even "if finance is given to a student in grants, they will not emerge at the same point as those who arrive together at the access point with financial security (Fleming et al., 2017, p. 7).

1.9.2 Health Issues:

Although older adults are living longer and are generally in better health than their predecessors, many may have poor health barriers impacting their ability to attend and participate in postgraduate programmes. These health issues can include physical limitations, chronic pain, and cognitive decline. They may also have reduced mobility, limiting their ability to travel to and from classes. It can also prevent them from attending classes in person or participating in activities requiring physical mobility, limiting their ability to fully engage in the learning experience. Luckily, these issues did not affect my ability to participate and doing so proved beneficial.

Several studies have shown that engaging in educational activities can help maintain cognitive function and improve overall mental health. Encouraging older adults to engage in further education initiatives such as postgraduate study can benefit their mental, social and emotional well-being, including increased understanding of ageing, improved health and wellness, social engagement and personal enrichment (Preston & Hammond, 2002; Panitsides, 2013; Hakim, 2016). Many older adults experience social isolation, which can negatively affect their mental and physical health. Postgraduate education allows socialising and interacting with people of different ages and backgrounds. It can also be a personally fulfilling experience, providing them with a sense of accomplishment and purpose. I have experienced many of these benefits during this course, and would I go through it again? Probably.

1.9.3 Feelings of Stigma:

Concerning older adults returning to postgraduate education, stigma can manifest as societal attitudes that question their ability to learn at an older age or see their return to education as unusual or unnecessary. This can also create a sense of being out of place or facing scepticism from others and could make **s**ome older adults uncomfortable attending classes with younger students, feel too old to be in a classroom setting, or even experience negative perceptions from peers (Mallman & Lee, 2017; Fragoso, 2014). t could also unwittingly create a sense of isolation and prevent them from fully engaging in the learning experience. This was an issue that I experienced when I returned to university as a pensioner. As a former lecturer, I now found myself on the other side of the divide, engaged in learning activities with many of whom are old enough to be my children or grandchildren. Even as a strong advocate of lifelong learning and learning in later life, my initial feelings were of embarrassment. I wished I were invisible in the early days – "an old man" still attending school.

Before starting this postgraduate programme, I attended part-time evening courses from 7 pm to 10 pm. Fewer younger students were around, and I felt slightly more comfortable. However, now that I am engaged in full-time study and classes start at ten in the morning, thousands more students are around. This made me more aware that many older adults may feel uncomfortable attending classes with younger students or feel too old to be in a class setting. While most of the older adult learners in my group are older than forty, I have a greater degree of comfort (even as the group's oldest member). Therefore, I can understand how older adults may feel when attending classes with much younger students (even teenagers). There is also the possibility of a lack of confidence in their abilities to learn new material and not to appear 'stupid'. Adults have a general fear of making mistakes.

1.9.4 Time constraints:

This was also identified as one of the barriers to participation. While many older adults may have more free time than younger adults working full-time or raising families, they may

also be more likely to consider pursuing post-graduate education. Some older adults may have caregiving responsibilities or other commitments that make it difficult for them to commit to attending classes regularly. This did not deter my participation in postgraduate study because I was a pensioner and had time on my hands. Furthermore, as a former teacher, engaging in further academic pursuits seemed natural. I was not taking part in any career progression. Neither was I aspiring to any further employment. I participated because I wanted to and satisfied the eligibility criteria for postgraduate study. I enjoyed learning but wanted to study towards relevant approved accreditation in a recognised higher institution because of my academic background. Unfortunately, many others may lack confidence in learning new material or feel intimidated by the academic environment, especially if they have been out of the academic circuit for several years.

1.9.5 Access to relevant information

This is a significant barrier because if one is unaware of what is available, it may as well not exist. Access to and availability of relevant information regarding postgraduate study boils down to increased awareness about the opportunities and benefits of postgraduate studies for older adults 60 and above. Many may be unaware of postgraduate programmes available to them or may not understand the benefits of continuing education at their age and this can limit their participation in higher education programmes. I was unaware that as a pensioner and 'older adult,' I could avail of or qualify for funding for postgraduate study. I came across that information by chance and because I had been contemplating returning to education since retirement. Younger mature adults who had recently completed undergraduate study were more aware of information relating to further academic study at the postgraduate level than older adults who had left the academic environment many years or even decades ago. However, once I knew of funding opportunities, I engaged in relevant online research into all the options for further study. I believe that there is a need to raise greater awareness about the benefits of further education at the postgraduate level for those who may satisfy the qualifying criteria.

1.9.6 Lack of motivation:

Older adult learners may lack the motivation to participate in adult education programmes due to a lack of perceived relevance to their lives, a lack of confidence in their abilities, or a sense of disconnection from the learning environment. Many may also feel that further study at the postgraduate level is irrelevant to their future personal development, possibly due to a lack of confidence. I continually feel my motivation is waxing and waning. I keep questioning why I must engage in further formal study, with essays to submit, deadlines to meet, class activities to partake in, journeys to make and meetings with supervisors. Sometimes, I want to go home, put my feet up and make the best of the rest of my life. Then these feelings dissipate, and I am back in study mode, actively engaging in all the academic activities I was battling to ignore. At the back of my mind, there is always that niggling feeling that I do not need to do this and to walk away because I feel I have nothing to lose. I had all the education I needed to carry out my professional duties during my working life. What more do I need when I will not use the qualifications for anything other than to feel better about myself? I would like to believe that many older adult learners sometimes feel the same.

However, for those motivated to learn and have a genuine interest in research and intellectual exploration, engaging in postgraduate study may hold significant appeal as it provides them with the opportunity for further educational and personal development. While ageing can sometimes lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression, enrolling in a postgraduate course can provide a structured way to combat these challenges by fostering social connections and intellectual engagement.

1.9.7 Digital Literacy Barriers

Many older adults, sixty and above, may have acquired their undergraduate qualifications years or decades ago and find the computers and information technology needed for their studies daunting and alienating.

Age Action revealed that:

One in four (25%) people aged 60-74 and more than half (56%) of people aged 75 or older do not use the internet. This adds up to approximately 275,000 people over the

age of 65. Of those people aged 65-74 who are online, 43% have digital skills below basic levels, and only 6% have "above basic" digital skills.32 In total, two-thirds (65%) of all persons aged 65 or older are either not using the internet or have below basic digital skills. (Age Action, 2022, p. 21)

In a related study in the UK, the State of Ageing Report 2023-24 claims that

> A quarter of people aged 65 and over do not have access to the internet at home. Having the essential digital skills may be becoming more of a barrier to older people than online access: only half of people aged over 75 have these skills and 43% of internet users aged 65 and over are limited in the activities they do online." (Centre for Ageing Better, 2023). (

These figures are reasonably commensurate with figures for Ireland collated by Age Action research, and this is one aspect of government policy on lifelong learning that demands attention—an initiative-taking national and comprehensive digital literacy programme for older people, such as that conducted by Age Action.

1.9.8 Other barriers:

Several other barriers to older adult participation include difficulty with transportation. Many HEIs are in urban areas, making it difficult for those living in rural and isolated communities to attend in-person classes, especially during the Autumn and Winter months of the year. Furthermore, relevant transportation (public or otherwise) may not always be available at required times, be irregular, or even start or close at inconvenient hours. A related issue is the proximity to the location of the HEI. Some older adult potential participants may also have long distances to travel to classes and may have to spend the night away from home for convenience. Some of my coursemates have had to deal with these difficulties and must be commended for seeing the course through, given that they were still employed.

Then there are family commitments, marketing strategies for programmes that target those who meet the qualifying criteria and the preparation of others who need to engage in undergraduate and other Access programmes such as the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) and the Maynooth Access Programme (MAP) programmes that

would eventually enable them to attain the qualifying criteria for postgraduate study. Unfortunately, participation rates remain generally low. While the actual take-up of older adult participants is scanty at the undergraduate level. It is even worse at the postgraduate level, and they may not even be aware of the benefits of higher-level degree programmes, especially if they meet the qualifying criteria.

1.9.9 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research question, the context and background for the study, the qualifying criteria for engaging in postgraduate study, many of the significant barriers to participation, and the underlying themes and concepts such as ageing, older adult learners, and lifelong learning. It also introduced Mezirow's (2009) TL theory and related concepts include critical reflection, perspective transformation and transformative learning.

The figures and statistics presented are highly significant because they contribute to and confirm, to a credible degree, essential reasons why postgraduate participation rates in HEI are so low. A scrutiny of the data suggests that after the statistical deductions have been applied, the remaining pool of eligible older adults would be small for undergraduate programmes and postgraduate degrees. Therefore, one can logically deduce that an even smaller number would be left to engage in full-time postgraduate study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Engaging with relevant primary and secondary research evidence such as interviews, surveys, journals, reports, books, peer-reviewed literature, articles and the like, this literature review aims to identify, examine, and critically evaluate relevant scholarly sources to expose gaps in existing research relating to my main research question: Why do HEIs have such low rates of gerontological participation (older adults 60 and over) in postgraduate education? At present, there is an almost inexhaustible supply of ongoing research into the social dimensions of ageing that explores wide-ranging topics, including social networks, social inequality, gender, inter-generational relationships, cross-cultural perspectives, and end-of-life issues (Dannefer & Phillipson, 2010; Formosa M. , 2014a; Fragoso, 2014; Kern, 2014; Schmidt-Hertha, Krasovec, & Formosa, 2014).   Further extensive research has been conducted into the various barriers such as finance, availability of information, health issues, family and work commitments, ageism, and digital literacy (Duay & Bryan, 2008; McCormick, 2017; Merrill et al., 2020), as well as policy and inclusion related issues examined below, such as the dichotomy between policy rhetoric and statistical evidence (Tuckett, 2016; McCormick, 2017) that may contribute to the low participation rates of older adults engaging in postgraduate study in higher education institutions in Ireland

2.2 Current research.

Given the increasing ageing population in Ireland, with 637,567 individuals aged sixty-five and over as of 2016 (CSO, 2021), society faces significant challenges and opportunities as people live longer. Mullen and Berryman (2018) opined that "many older adults are still able and willing to learn and should be encouraged to do so, as it can have positive effects on their personal development, health, and well-being." (Mullen & Berryman, 2018, p. 1234). Another study (Sweeney & Lynch, 2019) examined the relationship between adult learning and well-being among older adults in Ireland, focusing on the role of learning in promoting social connectedness, personal growth, and mental health. However, (McNair, 2012) noted a well-established trend

where individuals are less inclined to engage in certain types of learning as they grow older. Related research revealed that older adults are reluctant to pursue higher education because of various external obligations (Mallman & Lee, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to ensure that older adults and other senior citizens, many of whom tend to be self-directed learners (Tough, 1971; Brockett, 1983; Brookfield, 1985; Garrison, 1997; Merriam S. , 2001) can access all kinds of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities and significantly, higher education opportunities to enhance their general well-being and improve their quality of life.

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) supports these observations, positing that "policies aimed at increasing access to education for older adults may have positive effects on the economy, by increasing workforce participation, reducing health care costs, and improving productivity" (NIACE, 2014, p. 51). A study by Aldridge and Tuckett (2007) observed that "over one-half of all adults aged 65 and over say they have not participated in any learning since leaving full-time education" (Aldridge & Tuckett, 2007, p. 15) and only "21% aged 65-74 and 15% 75 and over regard themselves as learners" (Aldridge & Tuckett, 2007, p. 15). These low statistics are reflected in later studies. For example, the Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative (HaPAI, 2015) claimed that

> Although higher than the EU28 average, participation in formal education and training in Ireland by persons aged 55-74 is low, at 0.8% (HaPAI, 2015, p. 22)

Four years later, it reported that

> More than one third (38%) of adult learners in Ireland have low motivation to learn and either low or no engagement in everyday reading, writing, numeracy, and ICT skills practice. These adults are more likely to be older (HaPAI, 2019, p. 5)

Given these statistics, the number of people engaging in undergraduate studies will be markedly less and even more drastically reduced for those available and qualified to engage in postgraduate study. (Desjardins, Rubenson, & Milana, 2006) observed that by examining adult education programme participation rates as a critical measure of lifelong learning, it becomes apparent that age plays a crucial role in engaging in learning activities. Therefore, significantly increasing the number of older adults

accessing postgraduate degree programmes is formidable. However, those who meet the qualifying criteria would have free access to tuition fees, maintenance grants, and scholarships, including half-priced public transport as formidable incentives. Furthermore, reduced requirements to attend daily classes, a nine-month academic year of study (for a Taught Master's degree), free Wi-Fi and free multi-purpose software all contribute towards making the commitment attractive.

2.3 The situation in Europe

In Europe**,** Austria, Estonia, Italy, Hungary, and the Netherlands have experienced some of the strongest increases in adult learning participation" (OECD, 2020b, p. 2) since 2009. In other countries, including those in all the Nordic states (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland), Germany, and Spain; many higher institutions already run free or highly subsidised postgraduate degree programmes for older adults, even up to the Doctorate level. For example, in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland, the concept of lifelong learning is highly valued in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) like the Universities of Copenhagen (in Denmark), Helsinki (in Finland), Stockholm (in Sweden); Oslo (in Norway), and the University of Iceland, free or highly subsidised postgraduate programmes are available regardless of age. In these countries, universities often provide opportunities for older adults to continue their education, including postgraduate programs, at any stage. For example, applications can be made in Denmark through the Ministry of Education and Research (https://ufm.dk/en). In Sweden, there is a state-funded program called "Studiebidrag för pensionärer" (Study Grant for Pensioners), available through The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (https://www.uka.se/), which provides financial support for individuals over 65 who are pursuing higher education. Moreover, in Norway, pensioners may be eligible for financial support for postgraduate studies through the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (Lånekassen; https://lanekassen.no/). Also, the Danish State Educational Grant and Loan Scheme (SU), the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela; https://www.kela.fi/web/en), and the Icelandic Student Loan Fund (LÍN) all provide financial support through study grants that cover tuition fees and may also include a study allowance that much older adult learners, including pensioners, can access.

2.4 International Statistical Data

An examination of the (OECD, 2021) statistics presented in the tables below reflect the dwindling number of older adults participating in postgraduate education (precisely qualifications at the Masters and Doctorate levels, the older they got). The levels presented follow the classifications of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED, 2011), which is a statistical framework for organising education information maintained by the Institute of Statistics (UIS) in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It provides a comprehensive framework for organising education programmes and qualifications by applying uniform and internationally agreed definitions to facilitate comparisons of education systems across courses.(uis.unesco.org). For example, a Level 7 Master's degree would be equivalent to Level 9 on our National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

The OECD (2021) statistics in the three tables below reveal a sharp decline in participation in postgraduate degree programmes the older the age range. There is a stark decrease in the 60-64 age range from the 55-59 years range. For example, in Ireland, the drop in the Master's or equivalent level was from 604 to 193 and almost a 90% drop in numbers enrolling in the 65 years or over age range.

OECD Dataset: New entrants by age		
Gender	Total	
Age	From 55 to 59 years	
Mobility	Total	
	New entrants to the ISCED level. New entrants to a given level of education.	
Year	2021	
Education level	Master's or equivalent level	Doctoral or equivalent level
Country		
Denmark	85	5
Finland	173	28
Ireland	604	27
Norway	291	21
Sweden	444	28
United Kingdom	3202	594

Table·1:··Age·from·55-59·(OECD,·2021)¶

Table 1: Age from 55 to 59. (OECD, 2021)

Dataset: New entrants by age		
Gender	**Total**	
Age	**From 60 to 64 years**	
Mobility	**Total**	
Statistical unit	**New entrants to the ISCED level. New entrants to a given level of education.**	
Year	**2021**	
Education level	**Master's or equivalent level**	**Doctoral or equivalent level**
Country		
Denmark	11	3
Finland	33	6
Ireland	193	13
Norway	55	6
Sweden	116	7
United Kingdom	690	238

Table 2: Age from 60 to 64 (OECD, 2021)

Dataset: New entrants by age		
Gender	**Total**	
Age	**65 years or over**	
Mobility	**Total**	
Statistical unit	**New entrants to the ISCED level. New entrants to a given level of education.**	
Year	**2021**	
Education level	**Master's or equivalent level**	**Doctoral or equivalent level**
Country		
Denmark	3	0
Finland	2	8
Ireland	63	18
Norway	13	1
Sweden	60	1
United Kingdom	374	179

Table 3: Age from 65 years and over (OECD, 2021)

All the Nordic countries, including Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, also experienced this significant drop in participation the older the prospective students were. The United Kingdom (UK) had by far the most significant drop in enrolment, from 3,202 for the 55-−to 59-year-old age range to 690 for the 60- −to 64-year-old age range.

Similar statistics are also reflected in the participation of older adults in postgraduate programmes in all the other thirty-eight countries of the OECD. Therefore, increasing the participation of older adults in full-time postgraduate degree programmes at Maynooth University (and, by extension, other universities in Ireland, Europe and the rest of the world) is challenging. Older adults tend to experience similar barriers to participation, as mentioned earlier. However, by initiating a campaign to highlight the benefits of lifelong learning and learning in later life, as well as engaging in higher education programmes for qualified older adults, including financial incentives and various support systems provided by the university such as money advice, guidance and counselling services, assistance with childcare, debt issues, assistance with study and essay writing skills, progress could be made small steps at a time. However, information is critical. Even at an intergenerational level, younger undergraduates could be educated on the issue and serve as a human resource to spread the news to older adults in their family circles.

2.5 The situation in Ireland

Compared with many other countries identified above, Ireland falls below the norm in postgraduate participation for older adults compared to OECD averages. The average postgraduate enrolment rate across OECD countries for the 55-64 age group is 3.5% and 1.2% for those aged 65 and above (OECD, 2022). In 2021/22, only 1.4% of postgraduate students in Ireland were aged 60 or above, a figure that has remained relatively stagnant to date (HEA, 2023). Figures for 2022 reveal that the participation rate in postgraduate studies for those aged 65 and above was 0.4% (CSO, 2022). A report by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2019) claimed that while those over 65 have the lowest participation rate in adult education in most EU Member States, the expansion of life expectancy presents an opportunity to enhance the engagement of the elderly in educational pursuits.

In Ireland, like in many of the Nordic countries and others in Europe, the availability of free (grant-aided) or highly subsidised postgraduate education is provided by the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) scheme, which alleviates financial barriers to accessing study in HEIs and promotes equal opportunities for all students, including

older adult learners. Nevertheless, despite the incentives provided and available to older adult learners, the number of postgraduate educational opportunities remains low, and more needs to be done to enlighten, enable, and encourage them to engage in full-time postgraduate study at Irish Universities. A study (Connolly & Daly, 2019) highlighted high tuition fees, limited scholarship opportunities, and the need to balance education costs with personal and professional commitments. A related study by Mullen and Berryman (2018) found that older adults are less likely to participate in higher education if tuition fees are high. The study also found that older adults are more likely to participate in higher education if tuition fees are low or free. This study will concentrate on what can be done, why it should be done, and how it should be done to promote increased gerontological access for older adults to participate in postgraduate study, especially when it is either free or heavily discounted in Irish universities. These issues highlight the need for strategies and policies to address and promote inclusivity in educational gerontology.

Age Action (2019) noted that Gerontology research is crucial for understanding and addressing the needs and challenges of the ageing population. The Irish Gerontological Society, the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), the Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI) and the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ICSG) all support this view. However, limited research exists on the specific impacts of free full-time postgraduate programmes targeting older adults. Downes, Perryman and Bassani (2020) observed that free postgraduate programmes enhance access and enable an evaluation of their impact, which in turn elucidates their effectiveness in improving the quality and scope of gerontological research and practice. In a related study, Gonyea et al. (2020) stressed the importance of continuously improving and enhancing gerontology programmes at the Master's level to meet the evolving demands of the field and ensure high-quality education for future gerontologists. Therefore, it is vitally important that policymakers recognise the value of educational gerontology and the importance of reducing the identified barriers mentioned above and advocate for policy changes, such as increased funding for scholarships and grants, which can facilitate the establishment and sustainability of free postgraduate programmes (O'Shea & O'Connell, 2019).

Also, identifying relevant funding sources other than the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant, such as philanthropic organisations, private government foundations, and corporate sponsorships, could prove beneficial in supporting these educational initiatives for the elderly. Bauer, Hendricks, and Pillay (2021) observed the importance of establishing and fostering collaborative partnerships between academic institutions, government agencies, and community organisations to create sustainable funding mechanisms. Phillipson and Witham (2018) also emphasised the importance of incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives and addressing the diverse needs of ageing populations.

2.6 Policy-related issues and documentation

In an article that provides an overview of the policy and practice of adult education and social inclusion in Ireland, Lahiff and McEvoy (2018) noted that Irish policy is beginning to acknowledge the value of adult education and lifelong learning in helping older people maintain their independence and participate more fully in society. They recommended that policymakers concentrate on removing the obstacles that prevent older people from participating in adult education. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2018) recognises some of the issues raised. However, for entry to levels 6 - 8 higher education programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications, they all class older adults under the umbrella of "mature adults", identified as mature students who are 23 years of age or older on 1 January in the year of application, effectively excluding statistics relating to older adult learners engaging in postgraduate study.

Furthermore, the HEA's plan (including that of the DES) focuses on only five under-represented groups. These are identified as "entrants, from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; first-time, mature student entrants; students with disabilities; part-time/flexible learners; further education award holders, and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2018, p. 36), even though one of the fundamental principles of the plan insists that "equity of access policies must span the entire education spectrum and take a 'whole of education' approach to social inclusion" (HEA, 2018, p. 18). Significantly, older adults (especially the over-60s and post-retirement groups)

are not explicitly targeted, and the goals do not identify this group as under-represented. Doing so would highlight the importance of also acknowledging it as a priority. Instead, this is diminished by the blanket statement by Jan O'Sullivan, the then Minister of Education and Skills, who asserted that, as "a country, we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by increasing levels of participation in higher education among all Irish citizens" (p. 3). Unfortunately, this contradicts its claim and highlights issues of inequality relating to equity of consideration for older adults. I believe an underlying goal of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (HEA, 2018) was to focus on the citizens who still have an active work life to contribute to the national economy as taxpayers.

A related but more detailed, graphic and comprehensive HEA-sponsored report titled "Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education: What are the challenges? Recommendations for the Future" (IIRE Report, 2021) studied the participation of mature students in higher education, one of its goals was "to investigate the barriers and challenges for mature students (ibid. p. ii). While several mature adult age groups were identified in the report, it was limited to "participation in higher education for first-time mature students" (IIRE Report, 2021, p. 27). However, the study identified financial cost, family responsibilities, and commitments as major barriers (regardless of age), with health issues coming a surprising tenth on the list. It also provided statistics on older adult participation up to the age of 64 and 65+, claiming that "40% of the Irish population in 2019 aged 15-64 years have achieved a third-level qualification" (IIRE Report, 2021, p. ii). While this statistic does not explicitly identify the percentage of older adults engaging in postgraduate studies, a similar claim emerged from a study in America where Kuther (2023) asserted that about 8.200 older adult learners aged 65 and over were engaged in graduate study. However, she revealed that many graduate programmes restricted their limited number of vacancies to those with long-range career goals for the future, and this trend tended to exclude older adult learners.

Unfortunately, the IIRE Report (2021) fell short by focusing more on the potential of the mature adult participants to "hold high expectations that their efforts will result in rewarding jobs or careers" (IIRE Report, p. 29), while their counterparts, older adult

learners (including 'seniors' and retired participants), hardly received any mention. This trend is replicated in other significant reports and policy initiatives on mature student participation in formal educational activities. For example, there have been various national access plans (NAPs), such as the NAP Consultation Paper 2022-2023, the NAP for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, and the NAP 2022-2028 Report. Even international bodies like the European Union (EU), UNESCO, and the OECD appear to be highlighting the need for equity and equal educational opportunities for everyone.   However, various limitations seem to arise when it concerns older adult learners. For example, the European Commission's Action Plan on Adult Learning (2007) does not address the issue of later-life learning in detail. Another international body, the OECD, recognised that "increasing adult participation is a key priority, but policies often stumble during implementation" (OECD, 2020, p. 1). In other words, "many good ideas struggle to translate into real change on the ground, as they get stuck in the difficulties of policy implementation." (OECD, 2020, p. 1.). McCormick (2017) observed that "despite the policy rhetoric on promoting learning opportunities amongst older people, there are a series of factors that impede participants from fully realising their learning goals." (McCormick, 2017, p. 73).

Barros (2023) observed that historically, adult education policies are "marked by progression and constraints, continuities and discontinuities that have allowed the highlighting by researchers of several risks, inequalities and challenges related to the role of education and learning." (Barros, 2023, p. 2). Unfortunately, these do not go far enough in addressing issues concerning low participation rates of engagement at the postgraduate level. A significantly high amount of policy documentation, including national and EU policy reports and White papers relating to the participation of older adults in third-level education, focuses on the 25-64 age group, with non-existent statistics available for those over the age of 64 and in postgraduate education.

This trend extends to the Eurydice Report on Adult Education and Training in Europe, which provides a comprehensive overview of policies and data related to the renewed European agenda for adult learning and lifelong opportunities; the Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA), which offers easy access to various policy documents, reports, and briefings that raise awareness about issues related to supporting older people; the

Department of Education (2000) White Paper on Adult Education Learning for Life, which outlined strategies for adult education (including older adults) and lifelong learning, and even in the scholarly submissions to the Network on Policy Studies in Adult Education (PSAE) and the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) Policy Studies in Adult Education (2024), which contains wide-ranging topics relating to adult education and lifelong learning but also does not include any policy-relevant research statistics for older adult participation in postgraduate studies in Higher Education Institution.   Furthermore, neither the Social Justice Ireland (2023) report nor any of the OECD's (2018, 2020 and 2022) economic surveys of Ireland, nor even the Irish University Association (IUA) Charter for Irish Universities, which only focuses on the 25-64 age group, with aspirations to expand lifelong learning for this group from the current 6.5% to the 10.7% EU average by 2030, to the exclusion of those over the age of 64.   None of the bodies or reports mentioned above contains explicit statistics related to postgraduate education participation among older adults above the age of 64 and does not include any policy-relevant research statistics for older adult participation in postgraduate studies in Higher Education Institutions, a trend commensurate with and reminiscent of adult education lifelong learning policy in action in Ireland.

However, a recent CSO Adult Education Survey on participation in lifelong learning of adults aged 25 -69 (CSO, 2022) revealed that 35% of 55–69-year-olds participated in lifelong learning, compared to 64% of 25-34-year-olds. Significantly, only 10% of the overall figure was engaged in formal education, and the statistics do not provide a breakdown of the number of older adults attending postgraduate study. Still, it is evident that the older the learner, the lower the number of participants in postgraduate study at any level. The sample occurrence provided was too small for estimation.

2.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, one thing is clear. There is currently a glaringly low uptake of full-time postgraduate degree-level study by older adults and other elderly individuals. Other than financial constraints and other relevant reasons earlier identified, and despite the availability of fees, scholarships, maintenance grants, and access to loan and library facilities, something is missing, and other solutions need to be investigated to address this dire situation that exposes gerontological inequality in our higher institutions of

learning.   One avenue for further investigation is policy and its role in addressing issues such as the barriers to inclusivity and participation relating to older adult participation in postgraduate programmes in higher education institutions in Ireland. Fleming et al. have comprehensively addressed these issues. However, even while they provide a critical analysis of the policies and practicalities surrounding higher education access, issues relating to older adult learners are not given any special attention, and the emphasis is placed again on active participation for economic progress.

Regrettably, the overall prognosis is not encouraging at the policy level. The contradiction between the rhetoric of increasing access for mature students, on the one hand, and the fact that this group is still underrepresented to date was addressed by Kearns (2016). In a related study, Fleming (2004) argued that "the Government sets as a priority the learning that supports economic development." (p. 15), and the State is inclined to endorse a perspective on lifelong and adult learning that bolsters the economy, prioritising learning encompassing job-related skills and advancement. This does not bode well for older adults, especially those approaching retirement or already pensioners. The older they get, the less value they have for the state in sustaining economic development, irrespective of the type of postgraduate degree programmes they are engaged in or complete.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3 1 Introduction to Research Question

The methodology section is an essential and integral part of the research process because it provides information to other researchers who wish to replicate the research or verify one's results or findings (Bell & Waters, 2014), Alharahsheh & Pius. (2020) described it as

> The general research strategy that outlines the way in which. a research project is to be undertaken and, among other things, identifies the method to be used in it (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, p. 40)

This chapter will discuss the steps taken to address why HEIs in Ireland have such low engagement rates by gerontological participants (60 and above) in postgraduate education. Initially, I did what every researcher is expected to do: to use desk research to get a feel for the subject of my research. This relied heavily on existing secondary research from Ireland, the EU, and other parts of the world, such as papers, journals, reports, governmental and non-governmental agencies and the Internet. This initial investigation revealed the extent of the lack of statistical and otherwise information regarding the participation rates of older adult learners engaged in postgraduate programmes in HEIs in Ireland, especially for those over the state retirement age of sixty-six.

The reason for this soon became apparent. For all the rhetoric about lifelong learning and later life learning, the stark reality of the situation was that existing policy did not deem that cohort of older adults as having much more to contribute to the economy as formal education adventures into the postgraduate study were not expected to yield appreciable returns on 'investment', echoing the view of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) that the present European approach to learning and education concentrates too much on people as "human capital" for the labour market. (EAEA, 2022). However, other factors had to exist to explain the low participation rates, as any reliance on secondary pre-existing data to provide answers from

research already conducted by others was inadequate. This led me to consider a different approach.

3.2 My background relationship with adult education

My relationship with learning and education has fast become a lifelong event as I will be seventy next birthday and am currently doing a Master's degree. Having graduated in 1980 with an English (Hons) degree, I started a teaching career (initially in 1975 and before I left for the army and then the university) until 2005, when I became a Community Employment Supervisor. In the intervening years, I have taught various subjects ranging from English Language, English Literature, the University of Cambridge-moderated Advanced Level Literature-in-English paper, Basic Computer Skills to adult learners, English as a Second Language (ESL), English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Business English, in Nigeria, the United Kingdom and Ireland. In Nigeria, I was also an Examiner with the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) for the English Language Paper One for ten years. In Ireland, I taught computer skills to adults in every single community secondary school in the Dublin 15 area of Fingal County Council and the Leaving Certificate English (Paper One) to a few adult women's groups in the same area. I have also worked with Adult Basic Learning for Everyone (ABLE), the Vocational Education Committee (VEC), the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach and FÁS (An Foras Áiseanna Saothair; the Irish Training and Employment Authority). So, when it comes to older adult education, as well as transformative and lifelong learning, including almost forty academic and personal development certificates, diplomas and degrees over the years, I think I am in an advantageous position to be able to engage with the topic of this research project, though, as a pensioner I am limited in the range of further career options available to me, as it is unlikely that prospective employers will find my services of any benefit to them.

Throughout my teaching career, I always treated my students with respect and refrained from exploiting my position of authority as their teacher. In Nigeria, such a relationship is unfamiliar, particularly in an academic setting where teachers and lecturers have significant authority and where one would not want to attract unnecessary attention to oneself. I consistently encouraged these adult learners to

express their views during the learning process and even engaged with them in an informal and friendly way. I had a solid and ongoing interest in their development and always provided a listening ear and gave advice when required. I was always available and established a positive and trusting rapport with them. I tried my best to reduce the perceived barriers between teacher and student and strove to always get the best out of my students. I never addressed them in a derogatory manner, and their exceptional performance in both national and international examinations is a testament to the effectiveness of my efforts. Most of my students successfully secured university entrance and obtained well-paying middle-class occupations. Education served to advance their careers and break out from a life of poverty for each of them. I made it my duty to contribute positively to ensure they all accomplished their career objectives.

My recent transition into retirement/unemployment and my involvement in the M.Ed. programme were my most recent periods of what Mezirow described as 'disorientating dilemmas' (Mezirow, 2009) but which I would like to label as discombobulating dilemmas. The first challenge arose when I navigated the transition from my professional identity to a retired one. This prompted a critical self-reflection on my self-worth and future purpose. The second challenge I faced was adapting to new academic standards, especially my paradigmatic shift in reconciling all my preconceived beliefs, values, assumptions, and deeply ingrained academic perspectives. However, it has persuaded me to seek solutions elsewhere, specifically using surveys and interviews, and these research methods (albeit mixed) will be prominent in the selection of my research methodology.

3.3 Reason for this research

Research matters to me because it may help to explain why I encounter hardly any students within my age group on the university campus. It is easy to assume that the emphasis is on the younger cohort of students who may later be able to contribute more to society as tax-paying employees rather than on much older adults who may be construed more as liabilities by potential employers post-graduation

3.4 Mixed Methods Research

"Research in gerontology often employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to capture the multidimensional aspects of ageing experiences." (Irish Gerontological Society, 2021, p. 27). A mixed methods approach gives me the best of both worlds in methodological research terms. I could combine qualitative research's subjectivity with quantitative research's objectivity. The former provided me with rich living data, and the latter with more concrete statistical and empirically replicable data. A union that allows for triangulation helps compare and validate my research findings and should enhance my study's validity and reliability.to create a more coherent narrative and comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

3.5 Survey

The first method of data collection employed was a brief survey. The demographic comprised members of the U3A Ireland, a conglomeration of learning circles of older people who all share lifelong learning interests and are affiliated with Age Action, Ireland. Age Action is a non-profit organisation that advocates for the rights and well-being of older individuals and the ageing process. It not only provides detailed policy research and practical programmes to support older people, but it also actively collaborates with the Government, policymakers, and the media to ensure that the concerns of older people continue to be prioritised. In doing so, it effectively informs and influences policy decisions.

The intervention of Age Action on my behalf enabled me to collect through a survey, specific, though not necessarily in-depth, data about my research topic and with current technology (email and the Internet), it allowed me to target a significant, relevant, and specific audience simultaneously and in a brief period. Unfortunately, despite being sent out through Age Action to a mailing list of the two thousand nine hundred (2,900) members of the U3A (on three separate occasions), only ten

responses were returned, 80% of which were from postgraduate degree holders, including three Doctorates.

The survey (see Appendix 1) consisted of four main sections, as follows:

Firstly, demographic information (including age, gender, academic qualifications, employment status, and occupation) is needed. Secondly, Challenges to Participation contains six subsections, each containing Likert scale questions ranging from 1 (strongly disagree, to 5 (strongly agree). Thirdly, Incentives to Participate, containing ten tick-the-box questions. Fourthly, Preferred Learning Formats: This gives seven 'tick-the-box' options ranging from 'In-person classes'' to 'I have no interest, and from non-formal to volunteer. Finally, while the survey had short and closed multiple-choice questions, it also contained two open-ended questions and an option to consider voluntary participation in an interview. This was useful because it allowed anonymity and could not be misconstrued as intimidating. The respondents could ignore the open-ended questions or any other questions asked. While feedback from surveys can be immediate, in my case, it trickled back, and even though it had to be resent thrice, the overall response was poor, a main drawback of this data collection method. Another drawback was that not all the respondents answered all the questions, and being a relatively passive tool, it made clarification of relevant issues difficult because of the benefit of anonymity it offered.

3.6 Interview

The second method involved short, semi-structured 30-minute interviews, each consisting of seven sections, with no more than five open-ended sub-questions in each and twenty-six questions. The sections comprised Personal Motivation, Health and Well-being, Social and Community Factors, Financial Considerations, Perceptions of Age and Stereotypes, Balancing Commitments, Barriers and Challenges. Rich qualitative data were extracted, interpreted and analysed for the subjective data generated. Most of the responses were reflective, mainly because the interviewees had completed postgraduate research. However, a couple are still considering further postgraduate study, with one considering a second PhD. This time, the sample size

was even smaller, with only six participants, four women and two men, all over the age of sixty, but with three over the age of seventy.

All the interviewees were recruited from the completed and returned surveys, and 100% of them were over 60, with the oldest being 80+. The interviews were conducted over two weeks. Sixty per cent of the overall survey sample volunteered to participate in voluntary interviews. Forty per cent of those who responded to the survey were male, and the remainder, 60%, were female. All the interviews except one were conducted face-to-face on the online platform Zoom, a digital software package that allowed video conferencing. All were transcribed using another online platform, Otter. Signed and verbal consent was obtained before each interview, and an information sheet and list of interview questions were sent out to each interviewee beforehand. Before each interview, interviewees were reminded (regarding the information sheet they had earlier been sent) that the interview was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time they wished without consequences. They were also reminded that the interviews were confidential and anonymous and were asked to confirm that they were okay to be recorded. They were also asked if they had any questions before the interview started. Furthermore, though they had all been assured that a transcript and the video recording would be available to them on request, they all declined and affirmed that they were taking part voluntarily. Of the interviewees, 80% were members of U3A in Ireland and considered themselves eligible to undertake postgraduate study. All agreed to be recorded, except one was interviewed on Zoom. This was because of WIFI and Internet issues. However, the interview was conducted over the phone and successfully transcribed using Otter.

With interviews, the relevant information retrieval method was more personal and dialogic. This method proved highly advantageous because I could repeatedly replay the voice and video recordings if required. It also allowed me to collect non-verbal data. This was important because it allowed me to discern from visual responses the effect any of the questions had on the person being interviewed. I was also cognisant of the observation and advice given by Morrison et al. (2002) to listen attentively to changes in tone, observe body language, acknowledge emotional responses during

memory recollection, and be prepared to terminate an interview if emotional disturbances arise and offer appropriate support if required. A reference to the university guidelines on such incidents would be required. The Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy (MUREP, 2019) states that

> Researchers have a primary responsibility to protect participants from harm, physical or otherwise, during the investigation. Participants should not be exposed to risks beyond what might reasonably be encountered in daily life. (MUREP, 2019, p. 12)

Fortunately, there was no cause for concern, and each interview went well. Overall, the interviews and surveys aimed to ethically capture information about their attitudes and beliefs towards lifelong learning and the factors that influenced, or may influence, their decisions to engage in learning activities at the postgraduate level in later life.

Both of these methodologies were best suited to answering my gerontological-related research question. I also employed a semi-autobiographical reflective narrative approach to some of my research to connect it with and share some of my firsthand experiences and relevant contexts. It is expected that the data generated will reveal added information relating to the research question and that some survey responses will generate enough interest that some interviewees will respond to my request for voluntary participation in a one-to-one recorded interview, with the option of a Zoom video call.

3.7 Micro-ethnographic approach

During my desk research, I came across Age Action, a non-profit organisation that advocates for the rights and well-being of older individuals and the ageing process. It not only provides detailed policy research and practical programmes to support older people, but it also actively collaborates with the Government, policymakers, and the media to ensure that the concerns of older people continue to be prioritised. In doing so, it effectively informs and influences policy decisions. I was impressed by its agenda regarding older people and decided to become a member since I was also

older and could identify with its objectives. As a former teacher, I was also interested in volunteering as a facilitator for the *Getting* Started free, digital competence-based literacy programme to assist older people in getting online or using their smart devices confidently. I was impressed to learn that over 46,000 older people had completed the programme.

After creating my survey and searching for information to answer my research question, I encountered an NGO called Age Action. Age Action is Ireland's leading advocacy organisation for older people and ageing. Reviewing its website, I found it had a lot of age-related research and a wealth of related information. Unfortunately, their research publications did not contain the answers I sought. However, I was so impressed that I signed up as a member, given that my age was within the scope of its membership.

Subsequently, I contacted the organisation to see if they could assist me in distributing copies to its members' mailing list. Having explained who I was and what my research was about, I was initially politely turned down. I decided to put my request in writing, explaining in greater detail my research topic and how it was related to some of the objectives of their organisation. Their research officer contacted me two weeks later, informing me that my research topic was unique and that my request would be sent for approval to a higher authority. A week later, I was contacted by email to attend a Zoom call, during which I further elaborated on my research proposal and explained my professional background and that I was an older adult learner engaged in postgraduate study. The interview went well, and I was surprised when they offered to send out my survey to their broader membership, including the University of the Third Age (U3A), a nationwide network of older adult learners affiliated with Age Action (Ireland), the group's umbrella body. This was emailed to 2,900 recipients thrice over two weeks. I only received nine responses. I was disappointed because I expected a return of at least 10 per cent. However, the poor response spoke volumes and generated another critical question about what was responsible and how this related to the low participation rates of older adults in undergraduate programmes in HEIs and postgraduate programmes. The answer was later found to be multifaceted and highly revealing due to a set of fortuitous occurrences,

The first was when I was invited to participate in three one-day Focus Group workshops organised by Age Action regarding the Irish Human Rights and Equality (IHREC) Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty and Digital Exclusion. These sessions took place over two weeks. The specific focus of each session (and many more have been lined up over the next few months) was the issue of digital exclusion among older individuals who face difficulties accessing online resources due to the widespread use of a digital-only approach by publicly financed and private services, which systematically discriminates against and alienates older individuals who do not use the internet. The sessions were essential for my research because they made me starkly aware of the importance of digital inclusion for older people, especially concerning their availing of tertiary programmes at the postgraduate level. I never realised how significant this barrier was.

The second was when Age Action arranged access for me to join a U3A advisory group set up to advise on creating a multimedia toolkit to train 'older persons' on using computers and how to access numerous services online. We were thirteen in a group of five women and four men, all pensioners. At 69, I was the youngest. During the initial one-day session, I was able to make valuable contributions to the discussions. During these sessions, I had brief but highly enlightening discussions with many of the other twelve members. I found out a lot.

3.8 My ontological and epistemological perspectives.

The "first key question for a researcher in selecting a methodology for a study is to figure out his or her philosophy of knowledge" (Walsh & Ryan, 2015, p. 142). I view ontology and epistemology as interconnected and two sides of the same coin. Ontology is a philosophical framework that shapes our comprehension of the universe and our perspective of what is real. Thompson (1998) described it as focusing on fundamental questions of human existence, such as meaning, purpose and values (Thompson, 1998). Ageing is relentless, unstoppable and a fact. Learning is lifelong and not always academic. As an older adult postgraduate student, these beliefs align with my ontological perspectives regarding ageing and learning. My epistemological perspective aligns with my belief in lifelong learning and the value of education for

everyone, especially for older adults actively participating in postgraduate studies despite the various barriers that confront them.

3.9 Sampling

I used a purposive sampling strategy for this mixed methods research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Clark, 2017). The sample group consisted of 10 older adults, four men and six women, all above 60, and all were members of Age Action and U3A. This number was all that responded to my survey, from which six volunteered (four women and two men) to be interviewed. Bell and Waters (2014: 133) advised that "the chosen sampling method is very important and needs to be justified." However, I had to go by the number of respondents to the survey, and I had no control over that, nor for those who volunteered to be interviewed. Nevertheless, this did not diminish the rich data that emanated from the interviewees, who were genuinely interested in participating.

3.10 Data Collection

Data collection involves gathering information from relevant sources to answer the research problem. (Dudovskiy, 2022).. For this research project, data collection relied on an online email survey, Zoom online interviews, and several face-to-face meetings as a member of focus and advisory groups, one for Age Action and the other for U3A. The brief survey consisted of ten questions, some of which mainly included closed tick-the-box statements, though there were two open questions. The interviews were semi-structured and qualitative and were recorded on video using Zoom and transcribed using transcription software called Otter.

Age Action, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), functioned as the gatekeeper organisation that assisted with the distribution to its registered mailing list of 2,900, which included members of the University of the Third Age (U3A) nationwide. The survey included my contact email so respondents could indicate if they would like to be interviewed voluntarily. Unfortunately, despite the large volume of distributed surveys, the overall response was disappointing. I believe these methods listed above are appropriate for my research.

3.11 Methodological Limitations

Research design is crucial, as flaws will impact the findings and conclusions. While every effort was employed to identify these in this project, the effectiveness of the data analysis may be limited by the small sample size. Also, due to the nature of the methodology, the replicability of interview results may not be practical, mainly due to the qualitative nature of individual responses. Therefore, the validity of the data is based on individual opinions at any point in time, though the evidence gathered may be rich in content. However, these limitations will be significantly reduced using appropriate data analysis techniques,

3.12 Ethical Considerations

In research, a set of guidelines that direct one's research practices and designs are known as ethical considerations. These come into play when deciding what to investigate and how to undertake it, especially when gathering information from individuals. These factors also contribute to preserving academic or scientific integrity, improving the research's validity, and safeguarding research participants' rights. Conducting research that adheres to the highest ethical standards is crucial to maintaining the credibility and influence of the research in both the academic community and society as a whole. Ethics is not a science. It is not the same thing as following the law, nor is it the same as following culturally accepted norms. At its basic level, ethics in research is about conforming to accepted and standard codes of professional conduct. It is governed by national, international and global codes of conduct that include General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines on the sanctity of personal information and any damaging disclosures of a personal nature. These include principles, lawfulness, fairness and transparency, purpose limitation, accuracy, storage limitations, integrity, confidentiality and accountability.

Ethical concerns encompass dilemmas and considerations that emerge regarding the appropriate conduct of research, particularly in ensuring that "no harm is inflicted upon the subjects under investigation throughout the research endeavour" (Schurink, 2005, p. 43). To ensure that this research complies with the university's ethical guidelines

and that these are strictly adhered to, I requested and received ethical approval from Maynooth University before the project. The main reason is that any research can pose ethical challenges (Orb et al., 2001). Furthermore, I ensured that biases, assumptions, and prejudices that might affect the research outcome were identified, managed, or eradicated, and I was also mindful of the various restrictions imposed by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines on the sanctity of personal information and any damaging disclosures of a personal nature.

Conducting research comes with various ethical considerations to ensure research participants' well-being, rights, and dignity. Failure to address these may result in physical, psychological, or emotional harm to the participants. Researchers should treat participants respectfully, recognise their autonomy, and maintain their dignity throughout the research process. They must conduct their work honestly and honestly, accurately reporting their methods, results, and conclusions. Any falsification or fabrication of data is considered unethical. Ignoring ethical guidelines can erode the trust of participants, the academic community, and the public. Trust is essential for the success of research endeavours, and violations of ethical standards can damage the reputation of the researchers and the institutions involved.

Before including study participants, the study's objectives, procedures, and benefits must be appropriately disclosed. I ensured that I got their informed consent and let them know that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw without penalties. Along with protecting the privacy and confidentiality of any information provided to them, I also ensured that their identities and any sensitive data they submitted were protected. The degree to which participants' information is kept private must also be clarified. It is important to remember that unethical behaviour in research, such as breaking laws and rules, especially about privacy and the treatment of human subjects, can have negative legal repercussions, including lawsuits, fines, and other penalties. To avoid these consequences, I needed to be diligent in adhering to ethical guidelines, seek approval from the university and consistently prioritise the well-being and rights of research participants.

Another particularly critical issue to consider is the integrity of the research process for both the individuals involved and the research itself. The validity and reliability of

my research findings may be questioned if ethical misbehaviour compromises the research process. I was aware that I must endeavour to disclose any conflicts of interest that can affect my research and avoid issues such as plagiarism and the misrepresentation of data or results.   The scientific community relies on the trustworthiness of research outcomes, and any ethical lapses can contribute to scepticism about the validity of research in general and undermine the fundamental principles of scientific integrity, a situation Alice Goffman (Goffman, 2014; Benson, 2015; Zussman, 2016) found herself in following her ethnographic research project. Institutions that support or oversee research projects may also damage their reputation if ethical guidelines are ignored. This can impact the institution's standing within the academic community and among the public. I am, therefore, aware of the grave ramifications of any such academic transgressions, some of which include the withdrawal of previously published work, academic sanctions, loss of funding, denial of opportunities for further research, and damage to career prospects.

3.13 Conclusion.

This chapter introduces the research question, outlines its significance and why it needed to be conducted, and explains how my professional background relates to it. It also introduces my research methodology and addresses issues relating to ethical considerations.

The survey and interviews generated no more than ten respondents (10 for the surveys and six for the interviews). While the small sample size made the whole process of collation and transcription easier, the data generated was limited, especially from the survey, which was disappointing. The research could have done more with a much larger sample size. However, the six recorded interviews did generate rich information from the exciting opinions expressed, as did the several face-to-face group sessions I engaged in with Age Action and the U3A.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction to Findings

This chapter will provide an analysis of the collected data from my research. Preliminary findings emerged early in the study, initially through desk research and before the survey, interviews or meetings. It soon became apparent that available statistics on older adult learners. over the age of 64 was scant. Even at the early stage of my research, three patterns began to emerge. The first was that, as one grows older, there appeared to be a progressive but significantly dwindling number of qualified older adults available to engage in postgraduate programmes. Secondly, the lower the proportion of potential older adult learners, the less likely they want to devote their dwindling 'twilight' years to formal, scholastic endeavours that they may not believe worthwhile, especially at the postgraduate level. Many older adults above the age of 60 preferred non-formal and informal learning pursuits to formal learning endeavours described as

> Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources. (CEDEFOP , 2011, p. 7)

This type of learning usually results in accredited certification from legitimate educational institutions. Thirdly, findings were emerging, revealing that this paucity of older adult learners above sixty engaged in postgraduate study (especially at the degree level) in HEIs was not exclusive to Ireland and existed at national, international and global levels. Available statistical data of older adults engaging specifically in postgraduate study from countries in Europe, including the Nordic countries, as well as in countries as far away as Australia, consistently revealed that most statistical data available did not address this issue.

4.2 Results from Survey

I started my primary research by engaging with people through a survey. I chose this method because I believed it could reach a much wider sample size than a few interviews would and because it could generate quantitative statistical data.

The survey (see Appendix 2) aimed to determine the degree of influence certain factors would have on their decision to engage in postgraduate education. I will focus strictly on the findings or results generated, with any long comments and opinions reserved for the discussion and analysis section. Ten older adults, ranging in age from 60 to 80+, returned completed surveys. Three, all female, were employed either part-time or full-time. All (90%) except one had a postgraduate degree, with three having a doctorate.

Following the demographic information section of the survey, which requested information on age, gender, qualifications, employment status and occupation, responders were asked to rate on a five-level Likert Scale (ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"), seven statements relating to the section "*Challenges to participation*", followed by ten statements in the section "*Incentives to participate*" (see Table 4 below and Appendix 2 for the full survey):

| S/NO | PSEUDONYMS | Gender | Age | Qualifications | Are you still in paid employment? | Challenges to participation | | | | | | | Incentives to participate | | | | | | | | | | Interviewed |
						1: Financial constraints	2: Work and Family	3: Relevance	4: Lack of information	5: Health & Wellbeing	6: Social support (family & friends)	I prefer to use my own motivation	1. Personal interest or passion	2. Career development /skills	3. Social interaction & networking	4. Intellectual stimulation & challenge	5. Health and wellness benefits	6. To change the type of work I do	7. To get a recognised qualification	8. To help in my current job	9. To get a promotion	10. I have no interest	
1	Bukola	F	60-64	M	P/T	5	3	1	4	1	4	5	X		X	X							Y
2	Dapo	M	80+	RPEL	No	0	0	5	5	0	0	0	X		X	X	X						Y
3	Gbemisola	F	60-64	M	No	3	1	3	1	1	3	3	X	X		X			X				Y
4	Yewande	F	70-74	A/L	Yes	5	3	1	5	1	3	3	X	X	X	X	X						Y
5	Ademola	M	70-74	PhD	No	2	1	1	5	1	2	5	X		X	X	X						Y
6	Omolola	F	65-69	PhD	Yes	4	4	4	3	3	5	1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		y
7	Mustapha	M	70-74	M	No	4	3	1	3	1	2	4	X		X	X	X						Y
8	Yewande	F	75-79	BA	No	4	4	4	4	3	5	5	X		X	X	X						Y
9	Babatunde	M	80+	M	No	1	3	5	3	1	0	5	X			X				X			Y
10	Adeyemi	M	75-79	PhD	No	4	2	1	1	1	5	5	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
	Table 4: SURVEY STATISTICS (First 17 statements)																						

Table 4: Survey Statistics (First 17 statements)

The first of these statements was regarding "Financial constraints".   60% of respondents (on aggregated scales 4 and 5) strongly agreed that postgraduate education is too expensive. Regarding "Work and family responsibilities", 80% of the responses were below four on the scale, with three in the middle of the scale, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. The third statement was on "Perceived relevance". It stated, "I do not see the direct relevance of postgraduate education to my current life or career." The response was balanced, with 50% strongly disagreeing (1 on the Scale). Two of these (both female) work, one full-time. By the way, none of the men work.

Responding to the statement, "I am unaware of available postgraduate programs", 50% of respondents (two of whom were employed) were utterly unaware of available information on postgraduate programmes. Another 50% strongly disagreed regarding health and well-being issues preventing them from participating in postgraduate study. This section's sixth and final statement is two-fold and relates to social support and motivation. 60% of responses on aggregated scale levels 4 and 5 strongly agreed they preferred using their motivation. For those who deemed support from family and friends helpful, 40% responded affirmatively on aggregated scale levels 4 and 5.

Question seven was open-ended and asked if any other challenges or essential barriers to participation were not listed. One respondent mentioned a "*lack of confidence, limited confidence in using technology and language barrier*." A second stated, "*The use of technology in education is a barrier for me as I am technologically challenged.*" A third responder blamed Covid and the lockdown period for "pretty much shutting down" their aspirations "*for a possible second PhD*." Another mentioned "*Timetables, structures, expense, transport, distance, duration*".   An interesting response from another was, "*Just the invincible illusion among some of my friends that it is too high class for them. It's not.*". The final response to the question was, "*Proximity and availability within choice educational institutions that may not offer areas of study course preference.*".

"

Question 8 asked, "What factors would encourage you to participate in postgraduate education?" It consisted of ten options. Responders were asked to check all that

apply. 45% of the boxes were ticked. The option "I have no interest" generated no ticks, which is understandable, while "To change the type of work I do" attracted only one response.   This is understandable, given that only three respondents were employed full-time or part-time.

Options 1, 3, and 4 generated the most responses. These were "Personal interest or passion, career development or skills enhancement, and Social interaction and challenge." Together, they generated 27% of the total number of boxes available. All the responders selected options 1 and 4, Personal interest or passion and Intellectual stimulation and challenge, respectively.

Question 9, "How would you prefer to access postgraduate education?" offered five options and respondents were allowed to select all that apply. The fifth option, "I have no interest", generated no response. Half the respondents preferred part-time courses and another 50% preferred blended programme courses. 30% selected both options, with two adding online classes. If the percentage breakdowns do not appear to correlate with the number of respondents, this is because each one has five options available to select, a total of fifty possibilities. However, selecting all five would be contradictory because the fifth option states, "I have no interest".

Question 10 asks if any respondents engage in other types of education and are offered two options: Non-formal and volunteer. 30% of respondents were involved in volunteer activities, and 40% were in other non-formal educational pursuits.

Seven respondents agreed to a request at the end of the survey for anyone interested in being interviewed. I selected six only because, by chance, the seventh was also a member of the Age Action and U3A Advisory groups I participated in, and to confront any bias, I did not want to interview anyone I already knew.

4.3 Findings from the Interviews

4.3.1 Introduction.

Age and lifelong learning go hand in hand. Both are not static. Learning is usually associated with school and attending classes, but it is more than academic. We all learn as we grow older and as we go through life, and as we grow older, our beliefs, ideas, opinions, and perspectives go through a continuum of, at times, imperceptible and unconscious micro-transformations about life in general. I have concluded that age is the most significant barrier to participating in tertiary-level postgraduate education. Therefore, these two ontological concepts or dimensions and how older adults respond and engage with them had to form one of the main underlying themes for the interviews. There have been recurring patterns throughout this study about older adults, postgraduate, lifelong and transformative learning experiences, intergenerational learning, and some of the significant and minor barriers confronted. Having reviewed the online video recordings and the transcripts provided by the interviewees, these are prominent words and descriptions that have enabled me to apply what Braun & Clarke (2013) referred to as a "thematic analysis" to the data collected and collated (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 31).

The interviews and surveys aimed to determine why postgraduate study participation rates are so low for older adults like us. They also aimed to gather insights into individuals' attitudes and beliefs towards lifelong learning and the factors influencing their decision to engage in learning activities, if at all, later in life. Participants were asked to consider their responses to twenty-six open-ended questions encased within seven main headings. These headings provided the framework for the interview questions. Though structured to a degree, there was a lot of latitude for digressions during the discussions, and this was encouraged because it generated much richer information than the predetermined interview questions could expect, especially seeing that we all shared similar experiences growing up in all the decades and periods we have experienced to date. However, eventually, all the questions were asked of each interviewee, and all the interviewees were relaxed, friendly, at times laughing and joking, with a lot of reminiscing on how things have changed as the years flew by. As Schwandt (1994) observed, interviewees and interviewers "share the goal of understanding the complex world of the lived experience from the point of view of

those who lived it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). The whole exercise was more informal than formal, possibly because we all chatted on a one-to-one basis for about ten minutes before recordings commenced, and a rapport of trust developed even before the interviews correctly commenced. Some of us even engaged further after the interviews were officially over.

Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. The 26 questions were arranged under seven main headings, and randomly selected snippets of some questions and responses from some of the interviewees appear below. The full transcript of all the questions and their responses cannot be included in this dissertation, but the comprehensive list can be seen in Appendix 3. The respondents (all Irish) have been given Nigerian pseudonyms, and all verbatim quotations have been anonymised.

4.3.2 Personal motivation:

The following responses were given to the question: **What would motivate you to engage/ re-engage in full-time postgraduate study at this stage of life?**

Yewande's response to this was:

> *trying to keep up, there are certain times in my work, part time work, which is more demanding than others. And so, I would have a problem attending a full-time course because of that because I'm still working part time. .*

She identified timekeeping as her biggest problem.

For Bukola, social support from family, friends, and colleagues and financial considerations were crucial in pursuing postgraduate education. She did not see age as a barrier but struggled with modern technology, finding it difficult to use for assignments. Other interviewees also expressed some of these views in one form or another.

Gbemisola's response was: "

> *I decided to do a master's because after having a bachelor's degree, I didn't want just to stop. I just decided to go a little bit further and get a Master's degree".*

For Bukola, "*self-discipline was the reason I kept motivated.*

4.3.3 Health & Wellbeing

Do you believe that academic pursuits contribute positively to overall well-being?

Gbemisola's response was:

> *"Kind of in the middle, I will say yes. And no, because as well as studying, a study will bring its own difficulties as well....because speaking for myself, there were times that I couldn't cope with stress and was about to give up. But for some fortunately, I had to remind myself to fulfil my goals, and somehow, I made it to the end.*

This is quite an insightful response and a way of seeing health and well-being from a distinct perspective. To some extent, it is contradictory. On the one hand, engaging in further academic study has several benefits attached to it, yet it can also be detrimental to some extent.

For Bukola, social interaction was important for her overall well-being:

> *I felt like it was a way of dealing with the isolation, depression. Because I feel like the more you age, you feel like you're just left alone, and you have nobody to talk to at some stage....So, I felt like being there talking to other people listening to other people. It helped me to stay positive, and then learn from other people. And you feel good knowing that you are not alone.*

Omolola was asked: **What strategies did/ will you develop to manage stress and maintain a health work-life balance?** Her response was:

> *When you go to the university, get your brochure and everything, and look at the courses, sometimes we're put off because we don't see what we want or the kind of studies we want to engage in are not there. If I'm picking something I enjoy and love doing, then I can easily maintain my stress levels because I won't be stressed because I'm engaging in something that I enjoy.*

Finding the right course is essential, and some institutions do not offer a wide enough range. HEIs should probably do more to address this issue, possibly by conducting a massive research survey of older learners and contacting relevant groups, clubs,

associations, men's sheds, and the like to get a clearer picture of what special courses could be developed, especially for older adult learners and at postgraduate level. I do not know of any Irish HEIs with Educational Gerontology departments that could address this issue nationally.

4.3.4 Social & Community factors

This section had only two questions, so I shall include some responses to both.

Does/ did social interaction play a part in your decision to pursue postgraduate education?

Do you know of others within your social circle pursuing postgraduate studies?

Yewande's response was **:**

> *I would say yes, I would say so. Because obviously you're going to be studying with other people like-minded people who also are interested in the subject. And that would sort of expand your knowledge of people.*

And to the second question:

> *I don't know of anyone in particular at the moment who is pursuing a postgraduate course.*

Many other interviewees struggled to list anyone they knew of in their age group, either a friend or relative, currently engaged in postgraduate study. Significantly, not even one of them currently was, and speaking for myself, I did not know or meet any older adult like me in the three years I spent at Maynooth University and still do not know of anyone. Of course, this is not to lay claims that there are none, just that I have not yet met any.

She explained further:

> *...you know, the saying Martin that if you want to see a pensioner, an old age pensioner, a retired person, you have to make an appointment, because they're so busy into so many different activities, cultural events, like no time. …. they wouldn't have that much time to dedicate to full time learning.*

This response is very revealing, and I did not know the 'saying'. Having been actively engaged in the activities of part of Age Action and the U3A for many years, Yewande was in the best position to reveal that as pensioners, they now had more time for other pursuits they did not have time for during their earlier careers. Why would they want to put themselves through the rigours of a postgraduate programme?   I remember the first session I had with some members of U3A during a one-day workshop. Those I spoke to thought I was mad but envied that I had decided to return to education.

Gbemisola's response to the first question was:

> *Okay, in my case, that's not the case. Because I don't know, you can call me a sort of a loner. I don't interact with so many people, but this by choice, I choose to be lonely so to speak. You may sound sad, but to me if not I am happy that way. Okay.*

I am a loner myself and thrive on being one, even though I am married. I enjoy my own space, so I know where she is coming from.

Omolola's response was**:**

> *I think social interaction has a great part to play, and it's a positive measure. It's a positive yardstick, because it keeps you active and keeps you engaged, you know. And if you have colleagues around the same age group as you and you see the interest in advancing learning in some area, obviously, it draws you in to want to engage because, you know, you have that constant interaction in play.*

4.3.4 Financial Considerations

How important were questions of funding in making the decision to engage in postgraduate study?

Even though she is employed part-time, Yewande was still struggling to pay her bills and was unaware of any financial assistance programmes**.**

A friend told Bukola about funding**.** She would like to return to study but has now become a granny and would like to devote more time to help out, but commented that:

I always think like, you have to think about something and then see, make your decision, but I would love to because I feel like the more you study, the more you gain more skills, the more you learn. Yeah.

Omolola said:

At this point in our lives, you have our grandchildren. We also want to enjoy them and spend a little money if we can on them, but it was studying all the time and the studying takes up the money. Sometimes, you have to ask yourself the question, What am I doing? Is it worth it?

I've asked myself the same question more times than I can remember. At some point in life, some of us will become grandparents and would like to spend more time with family, especially those living alone. If one does not get funding for postgraduate study, then it is a choice between spending the little of the pension one has or paying for a course instead.

Gbemisola was sure that **w**ithout financial assistance, she would not have been able to afford her Masters and that she would reengage at a higher level if she were approved for funding, but not quite now.

4.3.5 Perceptions of Age and Stereotypes

Can you share any insights or experiences on how your age has influenced your interactions with younger students and faculty members?

Yewande said:

> *I make sure that they know I'm more than capable of dealing with the situation, understanding them, and equally putting them in their place when they need to be.*

Bukola also responded by saying:

> *I never encountered a problem with age-related issues while pursuing postgraduate studies. When I was in the class; I felt like I was just the same age as the students there. And then for them, they didn't see the age.*

I felt like age is not a barrier. It's the way you feel yourself. Because I feel like education has no limit. You can study as long as you can do it. You don't have to be saying, Oh, because I'm over 60, I can't do this, I can't do this. For me, I feel like you know, ah, it doesn't matter. It's not a challenge for me, at least not embarrassing.

"

Gbemisola's response to the same question was:

Disadvantage, the disadvantage part of it is technology because I was not used to technology and looking at the younger students and the way that they can easily navigate and I think the advantages was that I was old. They were eager to show me how to do things online. So, I took advantage of that.

Stemming from that response, she was asked a question that had not been prepared earlier: **Would you be better prepared for postgraduate study if you were more technologically knowledgeable?**

She stated

I could have taken classes on how to navigate online and using the laptop itself because sometimes you find I was finding myself spending hours working then I couldn't find the work. Yeah. So, in a way, I will say that I was grappling with learning, you know, the course modules themselves, and learning how to use the computer, research online, and send assignments online ....But looking back, if I didn't have some of the help I got from my fellow students. I think I could do a giveaway.

When asked, **what advice would you give to other older adults considering full-time postgraduate studies**?

With me, I would advise them to learn how to use computers. And how to navigate the Internet. Because digital learning is the way forward, I don't think they're going to revert to old ways, where you go to the library carrying loads of books and because of what I went through, I would, I would advise them to make sure that before they start, they have to know how to use the computer itself.

4.3.6 Balancing Commitments

Omolola was asked, if you were to do it now, **how would you manage other responsibilities (such as family work or caregiving) alongside full-time study?**

She replied:

> *I think once you set yourself a goal, you put your goal in place, you set up a timetable, you know, where you're starting and you know when you have to end. You just have to consistently maintain your learning habits you're stuck with*

4.3.7 Barriers and Challenges.

This section has five questions, and I shall select just two. The first is:
What obstacles or challenges do/ did you anticipate/ face in participating in full-time postgraduate study?

Omolola tackled this question. Her real bugbear is technology and the use of computers. Her having to use them daily in her work causes her stress. She also has a great mistrust of them. This is what she has to say:

> *If you're not, you know, that tech savvy and knowing the different setups and the different things you can use, yeah, to ensure that those areas of studies can actually, you know, be made easier, then it really becomes a battle because you're not exposed to those kinds of things. I have my age I'm not used to them. I'm just used to picking up a book and reading and writing. You know, what sitting down in front of the computer and I pressed the wrong button and something goes fuzzy. Oh my god, I thought panicking as in oh my god, what have I done, I lost my work, you know? So all those things are obstacles, you know*

The second question is: **What do you think can be done to increase the participation of older adults in full-time, postgraduate education in higher institutions?**

> *Dapo believed that those reaching retirement age should be given relevant information about educational options and opportunities in HEIs before they retire. He believed that "the critical element is to know what there is"... the message can be sent out to their jobs in some shape or form*

Referring also to members of U3A, he said:

> *Inform them that it is a possibility and available to them. And especially if grants are available, having leaflets available at meetings or something to that effect, just some sort of information*

that, have you considered this? Do you know that that's probably one that it'd be terrific? Because there you have people who are motivated sufficiently to get up and go to a meeting.

Responding to the same question, Yewande suggested three things: The provision of

more full-time education facilities outside of big cities. So that you could reach out to people in rural Ireland. Yes. Would be a good idea.

Maybe have more opportunities outside of the big cities, so reaching out to a smaller community, perhaps the online aspect where they'll go maybe once a week, but they could do it online. So, there's easy access there.

Thirdly, she suggested:

publicising more in libraries or places like university Third Age, or age action and places like that, that they could send out to their mailing list all the different possibilities for graduate courses in case anyone is interested."

Dapo had a similar suggestion regarding advertising:

having leaflets available at meetings or something to that effect, just some sort of information that, have you considered this? Do you know that that's probably one that it'd be very good? Because there you have people who are motivated sufficiently to get up and go to a meeting?

As did Gbemisola, who offered:

I think it would be a good idea if well-advertised, if it's advertised on platforms that most people have access to, like the TV, yeah. Yes. And if they are sponsored advertisement, and you know, if they sponsor, letting people know that there are grants available, if they want to, you know, to engage in course studies.

Bukola

For me, it's like this. Using the modern technology, okay, I'm not very good at computers, so I use the old ways …. "this using the modern technologies, there is no way you can avoid that. Yeah.

Maybe giving more extra classes maybe after, for people who are interested.

4.4 Conclusions

During my analysis of the results of the interviews, I needed to be careful when selecting verbatim quotes so as not to reveal any information that could identify the interviewee unwittingly. Remember, many came from the same local and rural communities and had known each other for several years if not decades. Furthermore, they were not only all members of Age Action but also of the U3A. I was cognizant of the fact that I had to focus on information that was relevant to my research while at the same time gleaning rich information relevant to why older adults shy away from postgraduate pursuits. It would have been imprudent of me to 'dump' everything said in all the interviews into this research paper. I, therefore, had to be discerning and selective. This was time-consuming. During my interpersonal interactions with the groups, I gathered that the U3A did not promote formal learning activities at the postgraduate level; rather, it supported its membership in other types of informal and non-formal pursuits, mainly non-academic pursuits.

.I have conducted interviews with at least a few hundred job candidates. I became adept at discerning which applicants were more suitable for a particular position or who would benefit the most from being assigned one. This is the first time that I have had to do things differently. This time, I had to record and transcribe. This time, I was looking for assistance and information from participants in an interview rather than interviewees looking for assistance from me. Before, it was face-to-face, in person, in a room. Now, it was face-to-face over an electronic device and at a distance. This time, I was chatting with people who were older than me. Before, I chatted with interviewees who were much younger than me. It was an awkward learning experience.

4.5 Findings from the focus and advisory groups

My findings from these group sessions related mainly to Digital literacy and exclusion, which were significant barriers. These issues exposed the extent of the problem many older adults encountered regarding digital exclusion. For a start, many members nationwide were not computer-savvy enough to even contemplate engaging in online or blended learning at the tertiary level. Those I chatted with during the meetings were suspicious of the Internet, and I do not blame them for all the frauds we are exposed to. Like many others I spoke to, I do not even answer mobile calls from phone numbers I do not recognise or that are not in my contacts list. Others rarely bothered to check their email, mainly because of spam and junk mail.

Glaringly, many had outdated software that Microsoft had withdrawn support for and old computers incompatible with the latest software programs, especially Windows 10 and 11 and Office365. I gathered that most U3A members lived in rural Ireland, so network issues with WIFI and Broadband were problematic. Many were still using Windows XP. Then, there was the prohibitive cost of computer-related equipment. Furthermore, their meetings consisted primarily of informal and nonformal pockets of activity around the country, organised through phone calls and word of mouth. I could understand this because, by chance, I had interviewed two of the group members in a Zoom call a week earlier, and they both lived in rural Ireland. During our Zoom interview, the signal fluctuated, and the screen froze briefly. However, meeting everyone was great, and I look forward to the next session.

Another barrier that they faced was broadband access. Many people who live in rural areas may experience difficulties with broadband and Wi-Fi, which could make those participating in blended learning postgraduate degree programmes, including online classes, face unnecessary difficulties. This leads to related issues, such as computer hardware and software, and related technology, such as smartphones. They may not be able to afford to keep up with upgrading this equipment and even the software programs. Many older systems will not work with more up-to-date software. For example, Windows 10 machines can no longer be upgraded to Windows 11 and would not be able to benefit from some of the software programs that run with it. They may

also not have access to the necessary, updated technology to participate in online courses. Furthermore, Microsoft has withdrawn its support for older software like Windows 95, which a surprising number of people (and even businesses) still use.

Despite all the previously identified barriers, the digital literacy and digital exclusion issues are significant and help explain why my survey responses were so few, especially when combined with other identified barriers. It can be simplified to two factors. Digital exclusion and the inability to access the Internet regularly, either at home or at work and secondly, digital constraint from being excluded from using the Internet due to problems with literacy or digital literacy. Recent research claims that "62% of adults over 60, or 637,285 people in Ireland, are digitally excluded." (Age Action, 2024). Fortunately, something can be done to revive the decline, one of which is Age Action's digital literacy "Getting Started" programme to help older people get online.

My engagements with the two groups revealed significant information about digital literacy and inclusion. They explained why participation rates were so low for older adults like us at the postgraduate level. The meetings exposed me to these issues in a way I had never thought much about, and it was generated from face-to-face interpersonal engagements. Both of these events prompted me to revisit my literature review, which had only a brief mention of digital inclusion or exclusion regarding older adult learners but which I now recognise as a considerable barrier and one which could contribute significantly to stemming the low participation engagement of older adults (60 and above) in postgraduate degree programmes.

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

My formal education journey from primary school to post-retirement postgraduate study aligns with my perception of lifelong learning and transformative learning theory that permeates the thematic content embodied in this research project. By being in a similar position to other retirees like me that I have interacted with throughout this study, whether by survey, interviews or interpersonal interactions, I am uniquely positioned to see and understand many things from their perspectives, especially concerning barriers to educational progression encountered as older adult learners attempting to, or engaged in, a postgraduate degree at any level. Considering everything I have learned from my research, it is hardly surprising that gerontological participation in HEIs is so low, with progressing age being one of the significant barriers.

Based on the overall data collected from all four methods of data collection used (Desk research, survey, interviews, and micro-ethnographic engagements), none of the participants in this research project experienced any age-related stereotypes or biases regarding older adults in educational settings. Neither did I because I was the one internalising the issue. Nobody made me feel uncomfortable. I was the one feeling uncomfortable in the situation. If I had been studying towards a PhD, I would have had more self-esteem because it is my self-actualisation target in life. It may appear to others (friends and family) that I love to punish myself at my age, but if I can be approved for finance and find a faculty that will accept me, I would go for it.

5.2 Comments on the research process

With the surveys, it was easy to address and analyse the findings and the results separately, mainly because of the type of data collected, which was primarily statistical, quantifiable, clinical, objective and empirically replicable. It could be interpreted from a table or a graph. With interviews, things were different, and the findings were qualitative, subjective, and situational, and the empirical evidence

extracted were the verbal utterances and the transcribed text they generated (Walsh & Ryan, 2015, p. 173; Richardson, 1990; Flick, 1998). The relationship between the interviewee and this researcher was interpersonal. It was, therefore, more convenient for me to respond in pari passu to significant and relevant responses given by the interviewees to the questions asked while analysing the recorded and transcribed data. As Walsh & Ryan (2015) observed, "there is no prescribed analytic method in most post-positive approaches" (Walsh & Ryan, 2015, p. 177), so this is the way I thought best to do it for mine.

Digital and computer literacy were mentioned in most of the interviews. I suspect that people of my generation and earlier have a distinct and uncomfortable relationship with modern technology, and this mistrust and belief in their ability to engage with it at the postgraduate level (not to mention the undergraduate level) may discourage many potential older adult applicants.

Intergenerational interaction scored highly, with no interviewees experiencing stigma or conflict with their younger coursemates. Most found their experiences enjoyable. I think HEIs could do more to positively expose and promote intergenerational learning so that older adults can feel more comfortable sitting in classes with others young enough to be their children or grandchildren. While this is encouraging, it does not account for low participation rates. This is possible because many older adults would be square pegs in round holes. In a recent discussion with Brid Connoly, she said it is okay to be "a square peg in a round hole" when it comes to adult learning.

All the interviewees with postgraduate degrees were highly motivated to reengage with postgraduate studies, if not for financial and other commitments. Financial constraints played a significant role in their decision to do so. For some, it was a question of whether or not they could get financial assistance, especially if they already have a similar qualification. Do they spare the little they have from their pension for their grandchildren, or do they use the money to pay for a course for themselves instead?

5.3 Influence of TL theory.3

My exploration of Mezirow's work has led me to critically examine my experiences and how they have shaped my life. It began as a journey of initially unconscious transformational learning experiences. A lifelong learning journey replete with what Mezirow (2009, p. 9) described as 'disorientating dilemmas.' His Transformational Learning (TL) theory has challenged me to willingly re-evaluate and challenge my decades of rigidly engrained beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives about learning and research. Studying Mezirow's TL theory has given me a deeper understanding of my perspectives. However, it also evoked connotations about older adults being seen as disposable regarding their involvement in postgraduate education. Firstly, the problem is not considered a priority for funding because it does not generate significant economic and human capital returns on investment for the government. Secondly, because of the dwindling number of postgraduate education opportunities, in contrast to the growing number of older adults (65 and over), particularly in Ireland (CSO, 2021; Aldridge & Tuckett, 2007, p. 15).

Between the earlier-identified barriers and what I now know, TL theory relating to older adults engaging in postgraduate pursuits is a transformative experience for them. It also enables others like me to challenge and restructure existing perspectives while also on a journey of personal, intellectual, and academic development. While ageing can sometimes lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression, for some older adults with the motivation to learn and a genuine interest in research and intellectual exploration, engaging in postgraduate study may hold significant appeal as it provides them with the opportunity for further educational and personal development.

5.4 Analysis of survey results

The survey revealed some interesting information, which shed more light on the statistics generated. Even though only ten respondents participated, the sample mix was evenly balanced, with five males and five females participating.

All the respondents were above 60 and pensioners, even though three women worked. Significantly, none of the males worked; All were over 70 and two were over 80. All the females were in the 60-69 age bracket (and working). The oldest was above 70

Surprisingly, health and well-being were not considered significant issues, with 50% strongly disagreeing that they had any bearing on their ability to participate in postgraduate studies. I believe that because 90% of the respondents had already acquired postgraduate qualifications, three (including one female) having PhDs, and one contemplating a second, they were already familiar with many of the rigours expected of postgraduate engagements. Only one did not have a postgraduate qualification but had decades of experience in the retail business, which could qualify them for admission under RPEL rules.

As in other studies mentioned in this paper, financial constraints proved to be a significant factor. Given their age and the fact they were all pensioners, despite three working, I would assume that engagement in a postgraduate programme without financial assistance could prove an expense they would instead do without. There was also a fair balance between those unaware of available postgraduate programmes and those who were. I wonder if tertiary alumni associations could have a significant role to play here, especially if they send out regular newsletters to their members. I did my first Masters with the Open University almost 45 years ago, and they still send me regular newsletters by email.

50% strongly disagreed that they did not see the direct relevance of postgraduate education to their current life or career. Seemingly, most had settled down to enjoy their retirement. It did not seem likely that, at their age, they would be doing it for career advancement unless they were considering volunteer work or self-employment, and it is unlikely that employers would find their services attractive enough to offer positions with career advancement opportunities. However, I am just trying to see things from my perspective.

Four indicated that support from family and friends would be very helpful, even though almost all believed they were strongly motivated. I would be interested in finding out

how their family and friends (and grandchildren, if they have any) would respond if informed they were returning to 'school'.

All the respondents expressed personal interest, intellectual stimulation, and challenge as factors encouraging them to participate in postgraduate education. Seven of them selected social interaction and networking. Given that many older adults may feel isolated and alone, getting out and about and socialising with like-minded others seems like a good idea. Unsurprisingly, only four people (two of whom were employed) chose career advancement, and one (an employed PhD holder) selected the option to get a recognised qualification, with 90% of the others not selecting this option. The most popular learning formats selected were for blended learning and part-time learning. This would alleviate problems with transportation and time spent attending lectures.

In conclusion, two main things stand out from this survey. The first is an essential and brilliant suggestion one of the respondents made concerning the U3A and the role it could play in increasing participation rates of older adults in tertiary programmes, given its large membership of close to three thousand nationally. This is what they had to say:

> While the U3A is doing excellent work, most of its activities are non-academic, which is fine. But there is a huge, missed opportunity here to integrate it into existing third-level institutions and then further afield.

The respondent went on to explain further:

> Ireland has a vast network of Universities of the Third Age (U3A) scattered throughout the country. It promotes lifelong learning. It has the potential to transform the intellectual life of older adults, often described as passive and monotonous, to one of dynamism when formally dedicated associatively with universities and 3rd level institutions. The (U3a) is a space for the activation of contributing and participating of older in the nation's economic, cultural and social life.

The survey also revealed that many respondents were unaware of available postgraduate programmes. University Alumni Associations could engage with U3A representatives nationally to investigate and discuss the abovementioned issue. The U3A could provide relevant information to its members and encourage them to consider tertiary institution activities that could eventually lead to postgraduate study. Furthermore, the Communiversity programme run by Maynooth University's Adult and Community Education Department could also get involved with this issue and engage with the U3A to find ways to collaborate their activities. This could generate further participation of older adults in postgraduate programmes, especially at Maynooth University.

The second important issue raised is my observation that none of the ten respondents are currently engaged in any tertiary level programme at any level, much more postgraduate study. This appears to confirm what my research has come across on many occasions: the older one gets, the less likely they are to want to engage in any postgraduate activity, whether full-time or not and therefore, is one of the significant reasons why participation rates of older adults at this level are low.

Based on the survey results, I selected six respondents for the interview. They voluntarily offered their services. The interview should shed more light on the issues raised in the survey.

5.5 Conclusions reached on focus and advisory group sessions.

An unexpected situation developed as a direct result of my methodological approach in sending out a survey, and it emanated from the discussion I had with Age Action about my research question and the subsequent distribution of my survey by email to its affiliated U3A membership. When I accepted an invitation to participate in four one-day workshops promoted by Age Action and U3A., my subsequent engagement with and contributions towards their activities (which I viewed as micro-ethnographic engagements) stemmed from a deep curiosity towards gaining further insights for my

research on an interpersonal level, into the experiences of older adults like me, regarding issues of age and postgraduate tertiary education. These are current and ongoing focus and advisory group sessions with Age Action and the U3A that I will continue to be engaged with long after this programme of study is over. It also unveiled the significant roles digital literacy and multimedia issues play in erecting barriers to participation in various everyday activities for older adults.

5.6 Conclusion

This dissertation has made me critically reflective deliberately, as if I were engaged in regular and continual counselling sessions, reviewing my life's journey so far and looking to the future for more transformative learning experiences in my lifelong learning journey. In a sense, the journey has been therapeutic. I am not a young researcher studying older people, but an older researcher engaging with my age group, with similar understandings about life and the world and of the social changes within decades gone by. We have a deeper understanding of the trials and tribulations we have experienced and the barriers we continue to encounter. We can speak about the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties with the authority of lived experience and to our credit, we can decide on which form of learning we are comfortable with or without, whether it be informal, non-formal or formal and on how far we can go with each and be more experienced when confronted with the challenges we encounter.

While a few of us slip through the cracks in the barriers and eventually engage in postgraduate programmes, we represent the minority of older adult learners nationally who surmount the barriers presented. Many of the barriers identified are not insurmountable on a personal level. At the same time, some may present significant obstacles for many older adults, especially those significantly older, before they engage in postgraduate study in our HEIs.

Age imposes limitations on motivation and relevance. For example, as a firm believer in lifelong learning, I want to continue formal academic study at the tertiary level because recognised credentials from reputable HEIs are essential to me, given my professional and academic background. Secondly, I would like at some stage to return to teaching basic computer skills to older adult learners, preferably part-time, and I

have offered my services as a volunteer for Age Action's Digital Literacy programme for older adults as part of their digital inclusion strategy. Thirdly, I would like to do nothing at all but relax and enjoy my retirement, doing many of the things I did not have time to do while employed, like playing more chess and swimming more regularly (I was a member of Nigeria's national swimming team in the early 70s), and to reread some of the novels I enjoyed in the past (I have not read a novel in over thirty years). Unfortunately, I cannot do all three at the same time, and so I decided to pursue what I love doing the most, and that is to continue studying. I feel confident that many older adults in my age group and older have similar aspirations, depending on their interests.

5.7 Outcomes and Recommendations

The implications and expected outcomes of this research proposal are significant. Conducting a comprehensive investigation to identify barriers, current successful models and strategies, as well as possible guidelines for implementing and sustaining them, such as alternative sources of funding to support the establishment of these programmes, will foster a more inclusive and diverse community of gerontological scholars and professionals, which in turn should lead to improved policies and interventions in Ireland for older adults aspiring to avail of further education opportunities at postgraduate level. The issue of low participation rates is not exclusive to Ireland. There is nothing unique about it because older adults in many other countries also have the same issues and confront similar barriers.

The HEIs themselves are unwitting barriers to low participation rates of older adults over sixty in postgraduate programmes in the way they promote these programmes and Maynooth University's focus. Priorities may not be on becoming an Age-Friendly University (AFU) (Cannon et al., 2023; Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2023;). They are not alone. For example, their recruitment posters for such programmes (as well as pictures in their brochures and admissions documentation) could address ageist attitudes and promote a more inclusive and welcoming environment for older adults by having a variety of such posters that also depict older adults. Despite all the claims of equity and inclusion, recruitment strategies that exclude older adults (albeit at times

unwittingly) from postgraduate programmes persist literally in plain sight. (See Appendix 3). A scrutiny of the recruitment examples on the page will reveal that the process is not very welcoming of older adults to the postgraduate programmes, and who could blame us for believing that we are considered a poor return on investment? Is it any wonder that I felt out of place? The focus is on youth. In all the recruitment posters I have come across for postgraduate study, there is no picture depicting an older adult of 60 years and above. Most of these posters are significant and placed strategically around the campus.

Secondly, the RPEL option should also be clarified and made more prominent in admission material to target older adults. Many may feel they do not have the academic acumen or prerequisite qualifications to engage in postgraduate study. In contrast, their decades of prior professional experience could qualify them for specific programmes. The above steps can be taken as soon as the next recruitment drive. Thirdly, tertiary institutions should engage more with the U3A, which needs to encourage more members to engage with tertiary institutions and function as a feeder programme for some tertiary courses that gravitate towards a postgraduate qualification. Age-action's digital literacy programmes can encourage some of its members to have the confidence to engage in third-level study, especially for blended or online studies.

Finally, many universities have alum mailing lists that could be crucially significant in providing information regarding postgraduate recruitment for older alums, many of whom may be unaware of the postgraduate programmes available, how to source grants, or even how to access other relevant information that could expose them to a transformative learning experience that could potentially transform their lives. Evidence is emerging from the EU and national policy on education that very little change should be expected despite the positive nature of the rhetoric. It is unlikely that, in the short term, this research will significantly impact increasing the visibility of older adults engaging in postgraduate studies in our higher education institutions. However, if some of the recommendations proffered are taken, the long-term prognosis could be more positive.

Given these outcomes and recommendations, this postpositivist, semi-autobiographical, qualitative, and epistemological narrative needs to be conducted on a much larger scale, with a larger sample pool and in greater depth, to explore the significant issues raised and investigated in this research more deeply, efficiently, and in greater detail.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Consent Form for personal interview:

Consent Form for personal interview.

I…………………………………………………………………agree to participate in Olusola Martin ADE-ONOJOBI's research study titled, "**Why do older adults (aged 60 and above) have such low rates of full-time participation in postgraduate education in Higher Education Institutions?"**

Please place an 'x') for each statement below **[*please delete or amend the statements as appropriate*]:**

The purpose and nature of the study have been explained to me verbally and in writing.

I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.   [ ]

I am participating voluntarily.   [ ]

I give permission for my Interview with Olusola Martin ADE-ONOJOBI to be audio-recorded.

 (either on computer or over the phone).   [ ]

I give permission for my Interview with Olusola Martin ADE-ONOJOBI to be video recorded.   [ ]

I understand that my conversation will be transcribed using appropriate digital software.   [ ]

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 Saturday, 8 June 2024.   [ ]

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.   [ ]

Student Name: Olusola Martin ADE-ONOJOBI.   Student ID: 21252072.
[AD610]

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: [   ]

[*Select as appropriate, by placing an 'x' in the box*]

I agree to the quotation/publication of extracts from my interview.   [   ]

I do not agree to the quotation/publication of extracts from my interview.   [   ]

I agree that my data to be used for further research projects.   [   ]

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects.   [   ]

Signed:……………………………………. (You may also use italics)   Date:

Participant Name in block capitals: ……………………………………….……...

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed: Olusola Martin Ade-Onojobi   Date:

Researcher Name in block capitals OLUSOLA MARTIN ADE-ONOJOBI.

*If during your participation in this study, you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact Fergal Finnegan (fergal.finnegan@mu.ie), or Michael Murray (*michael.j.murray@mu.ie*) or Angela McGinn (angela.mcginn@mu.ie). Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.*

Please send me a copy and retain one for yourself. Thank you.

Appendix 2: Survey

Survey: To find out what influences older adults (60 years and up) participation in full-time postgraduate study.

All information provided is strictly confidential and anonymous.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. My name is _____. I am a retired older adult enrolled as a full-time postgraduate student at Maynooth University, pursuing a Master of Education degree (MEd) in Adult and Community Education. I am also a member of Age Action Ireland.

I am interested in discovering why older adults aged 60 and above have such low rates of full-time participation in postgraduate education in higher education institutions in Ireland. The focus of my research is to identify alternative strategies that the University might implement to address this issue. Your input would be highly appreciated.

Please answer the following questions and place an 'x' in the relevant boxes:

Demographic Information:

Age: 60-64 [   ]   65-69   [   ] 70-74   [   ] 75-79 [   ]   80+   [   ]

Gender: Male [   ], Female […], Non-binary [   ],   Prefer not to say [   ].

Do you have any of the following? Please tick the highest.

     Bachelor's degree [   ]   Master's [   ]   Doctorate [   ]

     Professional qualification [   ]   Other [   ] (please specify)

Are you still in paid employment? Yes [   ] No [   ].

What is/was your occupation? _____

Challenges to participation:

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5

(1 = Strongly Disagree,   5 = Strongly Agree):

Financial Constraints:

I find postgraduate education too expensive.   [   ]

Work and Family Responsibilities:

My work and family commitments make it challenging to

pursue further education.   [   ]

Perceived Relevance:

I do not see the direct relevance of postgraduate education to

 my current life or career.   [   ]

Lack of Information:

I am unaware of available postgraduate programs.   [   ]

 Health and Well-being:

Health issues prevent me from considering postgraduate studies.   [   ]

Social Support:

Support from family and friends would be helpful.   [   ]

I prefer to use my own motivation   [   ]

Please indicate if there are any other challenges or barriers to participation that are not listed above and which you think are important.

Incentives to participate:

What factors would encourage you to participate in postgraduate education? Please check all that apply.

Personal interest or passion   [   ]

Career development or skills enhancement.   [   ]

Social interaction and networking   [   ]

Intellectual stimulation and challenge.   [   ]

Health and wellness benefits.   [   ]

To change the type of work I do.   [   ]

To get a recognised qualification.   [   ]

To help in my current job.   [   ]

To get a promotion.   [   ]

I have no interest.   [   ]

Preferred learning formats:

How would you prefer to access postgraduate education?

In-person classes   [   ]

Online courses   [   ]

Blended (combination of in-person and online   [   ]

Part-time courses   [   ]

I have no interest   [   ]

 Do you engage in other types of education?

Non-formal (e.g. Adult education courses, online courses,

community-based workshops, etc.).   [   ]

Volunteer   [   ]

If there are any other remarks you may wish to make, please share your ideas here.

Many thanks for taking the time to fill out this survey. It is much appreciated.

Next steps with the research:

I will collect all the survey information and use this for my Masters research. After I finish looking at this, I hope to speak to a small number of people about this topic in an interview (online or face-to-face).   If you might consider volunteering for an interview, please email me at █████████████████████ and I will share further information about what is involved so you can make your mind up if this is something you wish to do.

Appendix 3: Postgraduate recruitment posters.

TABLES

Table 1: Age from 55 to 59. (OECD, 2021)

Table 2: Age from 60 to 64 (OECD, 2021)

Table 3: Age from 65 years and over   (OECD, 2021)

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